

Blesma

The magazine for limbless and injured veterans | Spring 2024

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WITH HAMPERS
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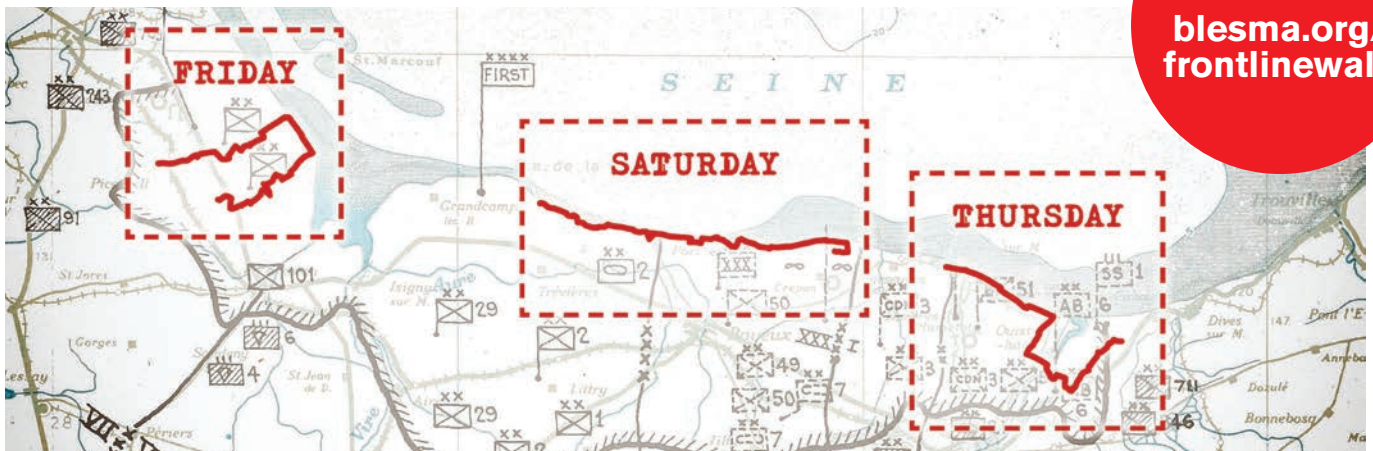


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Blesma
THE LIMBLESS VETERANS

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Army Benevolent Fund

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Veterans Affairs Minister Johnny Mercer MP talks to former Royal Marine Toby Gutteridge at the announcement of the VMF in October 2023



Veterans' access to services to get boost from two initiatives

THE VETERANS MOBILITY FUND AND THE HM ARMED FORCES VETERAN CARD ARE BOTH BEING ROLLED OUT IN EARLY 2024 WITH POSITIVE AIMS FOR THE VETERANS COMMUNITY

Veterans can benefit from two new initiatives aimed at improving their access to services and underscoring the duty they have performed for the nation.

The HM Armed Forces Veteran Card was rolled out further at the end of January, while the £2.52 million Veterans Mobility Fund (VMF) for specialist equipment grants is due to go live in mid-March.

The card, which has been issued to everyone who left service from 2019, has now been made available to anyone who left before that date.

“The card is a tangible record of your service, which is important, and is also an accepted form of identification confirming service that can be used when applying for statutory services such as health or veteran-specific support,” said Brian Chenier, Blesma Support Officer (Prosthetics).

“It should streamline requests across a range of health and social welfare organisations as the veteran can now immediately prove their service rather than having to submit paperwork and wait for responses.”

Above right: the HM Armed Forces Veteran Card has been opened out to more veterans

It can also be used to apply for services under the Op COURAGE, Op RESTORE and Op FORTITUDE programmes as well as to obtain a Defence Discount Service Card and a Veterans Railcard along with other benefit schemes offered to veterans.

“It is in its infancy but the entry point for a lot of services, including eligibility to join Blesma, is proof of military service so the card should speed everything up,” added Brian.

The VMF, which was re-established after a strong lobbying campaign by Blesma and Help for

Welcome

“VETERANS CAN NOW PROVE THEIR SERVICE IMMEDIATELY RATHER THAN SUBMITTING PAPERWORK”



The VMF will support with grants for specialist wheelchairs and orthotics

Heroes, is due to launch in mid-March and will offer grants for a range of specialist equipment not usually available on the NHS.

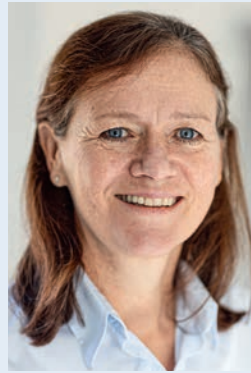
It covers specialist wheelchairs, mobility scooters and orthotics, with applications being asked to demonstrate integration with wider support addressing needs such as housing, isolation and loneliness or mental wellbeing.

The grant criteria also place an emphasis on connecting with other veterans' services such as the Veterans Trauma Network in England (now Op RESTORE) and the Veterans' Prosthetics Panel. The VMF, which will be administered by Blesma and Help for Heroes, will run for five years.

“We are anticipating a high demand to begin with so extra resources have been put in place so that demand can be dealt with as quickly as possible,” said Brian.

Details about the VMF application process will be posted on the Blesma website and social media channels in the coming weeks.

To find out more about the benefits of the HM Armed Forces Veteran Card and to apply for yours, visit www.gov.uk/veteran-card



Welcome to the Spring edition of the magazine. Our national Activities Team have put together a full programme of national and international events this year, and your Outreach Officers are continually busy creating full, interesting and varied outreach activity programmes. Please apply for as much or as little as you wish and enjoy the challenges, the change of pace or just the camaraderie of fellow Members. Of course, our Blesma Support Officers are always there

to assist and guide you with any mobility needs, welfare support or other challenges you may have. And not forgetting our Head Office staff who are constantly working in the background, either on income generation to secure the funds we need to assist you, or ensuring that your grants, applications, and other requests are progressed effectively and expeditiously.

Charities are facing serious financial pressure due to a decline in donations, increased demand and rising operational costs. Additionally, securing public funding has become a significant challenge with intense competition for grants. For the last three years, Blesma has been operating at a deficit and our income is less than our expenditure. However, as a charity we are fortunate enough to have healthy Reserves, and therefore, the Board made the conscious decision to maintain the same level of support by spending the Reserves. But this is not sustainable in the long term. In Head Office, we are exploring a TV advertising project to focus on legacy donations and raising the profile of the Blesma brand. This comes with an initial cost at a time when we are trying to reduce expenditure and raise income generation, but legacy is a long-term plan that will help shore up the longevity of the charity and meet our commitment to provide whole life support to our Members.

Having provided you with the honest context in which we operate, I want to assure you that there will be no loss of service and support to our Members. We remain committed to providing a fast, high-prioritised response to those in need of assistance, whether that is mobility, living or welfare support. We will also continue to support events, activities and individual pursuits.

Blesma is a long-term, high-performing charity with a highly regarded reputation. It commits to its long-term mission: to be here for Members for life.

Vivienne Buck CBE
Chief Executive





FINAL OPPORTUNITY TO NOMINATE YOUR DESERVING HEROES

Do you know someone who is worthy of a Soldiering On award? If so, you'd better get applying as the closing date for this year's nominations is 02 April.

The awards, now in their 14th year, recognise exceptional achievements within the Armed Forces community. There are 12 categories to enter, ranging from Family Values and Animal Partnership to Defence Inclusivity, Inspiration, Business, and more.

"Soldiering On awards brings together the whole Armed Forces community," said Lt Col Ren Kapur MBE, CEO of the awards. "It is more than an event; it's a collective effort to honour those who make a lasting impact in the lives of

Strongman Mac switches focus to Invictus Games

Strongman Mac McLaren has added another round of heavy duty competition triumphs to his list of achievements despite spending four months out of the gym. The former Royal Highland Fusilier was sidelined after his right leg was amputated because of long-running pain and complications following injuries while serving in Bosnia, Northern Ireland and Iraq.

The 46 year old retained his World's Strongest Disabled Man title in Florida for the third year running and was placed third in the Static Monsters World Championships.

"I was really pleased with my performance because I was forbidden to go near a gym for four months after the surgery and then suffered a shoulder injury in a warm-up competition," said Mac, from Gillingham.

He is now switching his sporting focus to the Invictus Games and aims to qualify for several events. "This will be my fourth

attempt to make the team. I lost my aunt Elaine in October, and my mum Katarina died two years ago. They were supporters of everything I did and were so proud of me. They never got to see me at Invictus, so I would like to do this in their memory. It is going to be a tough year with new disciplines, but I'm really looking forward to the challenge."

Blesma has supported Mac's Herculean efforts and has provided him with home adaptations.

"My partner Clare has been my rock throughout, and we appreciate everything that Blesma has done for us. We did a car boot sale that raised £150 for the

Association last year because

we wanted to do what we could to help," said Mac, who was medically discharged from the Army in 2005.



If anyone wants to learn more about disabled strongman events, contact gb.disabled.strongman@gmail.com



our Armed Forces community and society as a whole."

This year sees the introduction of the Employee Champion Award, which will shine a spotlight on those individuals who actively support members of the Armed Forces community in civilian careers and champion the employability of service leavers, reservists, veterans, spouses and family members.

The nomination process is open to everyone – family members, friends and colleagues can nominate their deserving candidates, with the ultimate aim being to scoop a gong at the spectacular awards night in October.

Submit your nominations online now via the Soldiering On awards website www.soldieringon.org



Blesma Member Gam Gurung is already taking part in the study

Your chance to take part in groundbreaking study

Researchers developing advanced hand and wrist prostheses are inviting Blesma Members to participate in pioneering trials. Their innovative prosthetic arm promises to deliver greater wrist flexibility and a wider range of hand movements using ultrasound to translate the body's electronic impulses into hand movements.

Volunteers will spend four or five sessions at Imperial College London's White City campus where they will test the prosthetic and have their actions and muscle and nerve responses tracked by motion capture cameras and electronic diagnostics.

"Current arm prostheses offer one range of movement but this new model we are developing seeks to provide the full range of natural hand and wrist movements," said Halla Hakami, who is the lead researcher on the project for Imperial College's Neuromechanics and Rehabilitation Technology Lab. "The aim



of the programme is to create prostheses that will allow wearers to have more flexibility and greater freedom.

"These trials are important to test the prosthetic's functionality and to ensure that we understand any impact it may have on the body from compensatory movements that might cause future pain or discomfort.

"Anyone taking part in the trials will be playing an important role in making an advanced, responsive and much lighter prosthetic arm available to those with upper limb loss. We already have one Blesma volunteer and it would be great to

have more Members of the Association involved in the project."

Participants will be compensated for their time and travel costs for the sessions, which will each last between two and three hours.

For further details, contact Halla by email at hh120@ic.ac.uk

GRAHAM ON FORM TO RAISE FUNDS

Blesma Member Graham Kelly (below) put in the laps late last year in a sponsored 120km ride on his hand trike to raise £530 for the Association.

The former Lance Corporal in the North Irish Horse Regiment rode 120 circuits of a route around The Waterworks Park in Belfast over four sessions as part of the Association's Remembrance 11K event.

"I've taken part in the event for the last two years by covering it in the gym, but as it was recently Blesma's 90th anniversary I decided I would complete 90km on my hand trike. But I felt strong enough to keep going and reached 120km. I'm delighted with the result!" said Graham.



HOW MUCH TO NORWAY, GUV?

Fundraiser Paul Mason is driving his ex-London taxi on a 4,000-mile round trip to Narvik in the upper reaches of Norway in aid of several military charities including Blesma.

"The temperatures are around -27°C and there's 8ft of snow in places, so a taxi may not be the most suitable vehicle for the journey," said lorry driver Paul, who served for 15 years in the RAF. "We will be driving about 400 miles a day and it should take 10 to 14 days."

Paul is hoping the Taxi to Norway expedition will be rewarded with a sight of the Northern Lights. "It will be a great bonus if we do get that experience but the main aim is to raise funds and awareness for the great work done by charities like Blesma," he said.

Blesma Members recognised at Northern Ireland Veterans Awards

Two Blesma Members have received prestigious awards for their charity work and service to communities in Northern Ireland. Brian McKee was awarded Volunteer of the Year and Bryan Phillips picked up the accolades Inspiration of the Year and 2023 Veteran of the Year at the Northern Ireland Veterans Awards last October.

“It was great to be at the event, but I never expected an award,” said Brian, a former member of the Ulster Defence Regiment who has been instrumental in getting wheelchairs and walking aids to those who need them. “I was speechless when they said my name. It was very humbling.”

Brian, who suffered severe back injuries while serving, started the service five years ago. He also enjoys the hobby of wood turning, working on a lathe to craft traditional blackthorn walking sticks, some of which have been auctioned for Blesma.

Bryan Phillips, who lost both his legs above the knee to an IED while on patrol in Afghanistan in 2012 was also recently awarded the British Empire Medal in the



From left: Brian McKee, Bryan Phillips and Outreach Officer Fiona Morrison

King’s New Year’s Honours List for his fundraising efforts, which have brought in around £100,000 for various charities.

The former Lance Corporal with the 1st Battalion The Irish Guards, who has completed Blesma’s Making Generation R programme and delivered inspirational talks across Northern Ireland, was unable to attend the ceremony but organiser Jason Gillard said: “He was a deserved winner from a very strong list of nominees. He won the Inspiration Award for his fundraising work for Blesma, other charities and across the wider community, and the judging panel then gave him the overall Veteran of the Year award.

“The amount the pair have put back into the community is incredible, and it was great to recognise their selfless efforts on a really inspiring night.”

Blesma has been chosen as the headline charity of the 2024 awards. “Everyone involved is so impressed with the work that the Association does, and we are delighted to select Blesma as our main charity for this year,” said Jason.

HALF MARATHON AND MARRIAGE ON THE HORIZON FOR RUSS KIRBY

RUSS KIRBY IS PUTTING IN THE MILES to raise funds for Blesma and to get in shape for his wedding this summer. The former Royal Navy man is running the London Landmarks Half Marathon in April and is getting married to Sarah Deans, a former

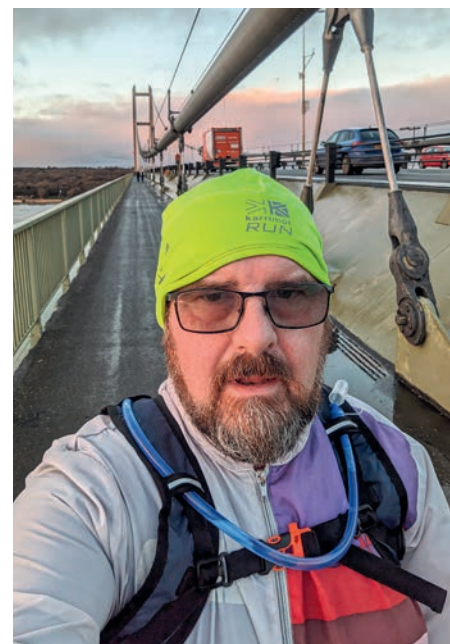


member of the Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps, in June.

“I wanted to do something for Blesma, but I also need to get myself fit for the big day,” said Russ, 62, who served on HMS Antrim before a motorbike accident cut his military career short when he was just 20 years old.

“I’ve always run as an amateur but not so much recently, and my left arm is paralysed from the accident, but I’m going to run as much of the half marathon as possible.”

Russ, from Barton-upon-Humber, who organises a branch of the Armed Forces Veterans Breakfast Club, added: “I was introduced to Blesma by Outreach Officer Adele Miller and have been on some activities and seen the great work it does, so I’m delighted to be running for the charity.”





John Dickson of Esken Renewables (left) with Member Kev Charnley

Corporate partner brings bags of Christmas cheer

Corporate partner Esken Renewables delivered Christmas hampers to 25 Members in the run-up to the festive season. The company is the UK's leading biomass fuel supplier and has just signed up for an 18-month partnership with the Association.

It already has a range of activities and events planned to help raise funds for Blesma.

Staff from Esken offices around the country got the partnership rolling by hand-delivering hampers as part of an initiative to bring cheer to Members spending all or part of the festive period alone.

"Our regional managers and administration teams delivered the hampers, and the feedback we got was that the Members thought they were fantastic," said John Dickson (pictured), the company's Distribution Manager, who served in the military for 24 years before joining the industry eight years ago.



"From our perspective, it was very humbling and it was really good to engage with the Members and hear their stories. Some were Widows and it was nice to know they are also supported by the charity. I suggested Blesma as one of our three charity partners and the teams are excited to raise funds and spread the word about the work the Association does for veterans and their families."

Esken Renewables, which has its head office in Widnes, has a nationwide team of more than 300 who specialise in the waste and recycling supply chain from collection through processing to renewable fuel supplies that contribute to the

UK's annual domestic electricity needs. The company is an Armed Forces Covenant Gold Award holder for its excellence in working for the Armed Forces community.

News in brief

NEW SCOOTER GIVES BRENDA HER FREEDOM

A lightweight scooter funded by Blesma has given Brenda Warrilow her freedom back and she has been getting to grips with the machine at her local shops.

"My daughter took me shopping and I went into a Primark," said Brenda, a Widow from Birmingham whose husband Ronald served with the Royal Warwickshire Regiment in Northern Ireland and Cyprus. "At one point I thought I was going a bit slow, and when I turned around I realised that I had hooked a rail of clothes and was pulling it along! It was chaos in the shop, but I just kept telling people that it was my first time!"



"But the scooter has definitely given me back my independence and I'm very grateful to Blesma."

Brenda's daughter Kim Edwin, whose husband Neil is a regular Blesma fundraiser, said: "Mum's mobility has really gone downhill, so it has been fantastic for her to get the scooter so that she can get around. It makes a huge difference to her."

"My dad was proud of his service, and being part of Blesma was great for him because he loved being with other people who shared similar experiences. It is an amazing organisation."

Looking back at Blesma's most well-attended carol service ever

The Association's Christmas carol service provided an uplifting end to 2023 with choral performances, readings and rousing carols that resonated around Chelmsford Cathedral.

The service, attended by Blesma Patron HRH The Duke of Gloucester, was a sell-out, with more than 300 people enjoying the festivities that were rounded off with mulled wine, mince pies and a good mingle.

The 30-strong Essex Police Community Choir performed four songs and the gathering was then treated to the exceptional voice of soprano Naomi Kilby,

"IT WAS THE MOST WELL-ATTENDED CHRISTMAS CAROL SERVICE WE HAVE HELD – EVERY SEAT WAS TAKEN!"

accompanied by Nigel Foster, singing *The Little Road to Bethlehem* and *Silent Night*.

Blesma Trustee Miles Ambler and Member Simon Bell, a former RAF medic, gave readings, and Blesma's Finance and Support Services Director Boston Mwense was joined by David Bousho, both members of St Alban's Roman Catholic Church in Hornchurch, for a duet of traditional songs.

The evening finished with an opportunity for guests and members of the congregation to meet injured veterans and learn how Blesma supports them and their families.

"It was a memorable service that everyone really enjoyed," said Abbie-Louise Thomas, Blesma's Community and Events Fundraising Manager. "It was the most well-attended Christmas carol service we have held – every seat was taken!"

"We raised £1,549 from a collection, which was great, and we had amazing feedback a few days later at a bucket collection in Chelmsford from people who had attended and had found out more about Blesma."



A congregation some 300 strong attended the Blesma carol service in Chelmsford



Left: Charles Bishop, High Sheriff of Essex



Soprano Naomi Kilby in full voice



Chelmsford Cathedral catches the eye



The Essex Police Community Choir



Scott Blaney won silver in the World Para Championships

Duo prove that they are some of the world's best

Blesma Members Paul Skivington and Scott Blaney (above) returned triumphant from the World Para Jiu-Jitsu Championships in November with an impressive medal haul. Paul picked up a silver and bronze and Scott a silver as they competed with the world's best in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, a self-defence martial art.

The pair, who trained intensively for the competition in Abu Dhabi, were supported and sponsored by Blesma.

"This was the pinnacle of Para jiu-jitsu, and Scott and I were delighted to come back with medals," said Paul, 46, who served with Royal 9 Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers and captained the GB golf team in the Simpson Cup after losing his left leg above the knee in a motorbike accident.



Scott, a 39-year-old former Grenadier Guardsman from Nuneaton who had his leg amputated below the knee after being caught in a mine explosion in Afghanistan in 2007, said: "It was great to be representing Great Britain, and to get a silver medal and be second in the world is something special."

Scott, who has rowed the Atlantic, swum the English Channel and became a golf professional, said: "We trained virtually every day and it was worth it." Paul added: "I would recommend jiu-jitsu to Members.

We compete against able-bodied athletes and your disability can be an advantage."

Paul has offered a Members' taster class. Anyone interested should contact the Activities Team on activities@blesma.org

News in brief

JEFF CAN'T PUT A PRICE ON FITNESS

A recycled recumbent trike helped Jeff Price hit the road to recovery after a spell in hospital. The 47 year old dropped 42 pounds in weight while suffering from gallstones and a series of infections, leaving him weighing little more than nine stones.

"The trike came from another Member and was brilliant as I'd lost so much weight and the muscles in my good leg had wasted away," said Jeff, who served in the Royal Artillery.



The fitness boost encouraged Jeff to join Blesma's ski trip to La Plagne in January and he has now purchased a second-hand sit-ski with the help of a Blesma grant.

"It has been a long journey since I lost my leg six years ago," he added. "Getting back to fitness has been so important to me mentally and physically. It was fantastic being on the ski trip with people who have shared experiences and understand each other. I'm going to use the sit-ski at the indoor ski slope, so I'm really thankful to Blesma for all their help."

GOT A STORY? GET IN TOUCH!

Have you got a story you'd like to tell? Want some help publicising an event or expedition you're planning? To put your story in the magazine just get in touch with us at editor@blesma.org



Paul Fisher: “This trip with Blesma has inspired me”

Keen skier Paul Fisher enjoyed the thrill of the slopes after more than 15 years’ absence thanks to the winter sports week in La Plagne in January.

The 62 year old, who skied during his Army service, had to quit the sport following an operation to repair spinal damage suffered in a car bomb attack.

“From start to finish, the whole trip was incredible,” said Paul, who was injured in a double car bomb explosion in Northern Ireland in 1996. “The instructors were really patient and adaptable, and the week opened my eyes to what is possible.

I thought I would never ski again, but it was fantastic to be out there once more.”

Paul, who served 22 years in the Royal Corps of Transport, experienced pain and loss of feeling caused by spinal cord damage from the blast, but the issue was not dealt with until 2011 – five years after he had left the Army.



“I went into hospital on the Monday and expected to be back in work the following week, but I woke up paralysed from the neck down. I went from being employed in a good job to waking up with nothing and having to use a wheelchair.

“I have a strong family and have made progress to walk on crutches. I can’t praise

the Blesma team enough for putting on such a fantastic trip. It was great being with other Members, and there was a range of skiing abilities that were all catered for.”

Paul, who lives in Lisburn, Northern Ireland is hoping to improve his sit-ski skills so he can take

his wife Julie on a trip to the slopes for her 60th birthday. “It is going to take a lot of hard work but this trip with Blesma has inspired me and given me the belief that you can do things no matter your disability.”

To read Member Kirk Bowett’s report on the winter sports activity turn to p56

MARATHON RUNNERS DOING IT FOR BLESMA

RENA HAWKINS WILL BE CHEERED on by her son, Member Matt Weston, when she runs this year’s London Marathon in April. It will be the hospital theatre manager’s 19th marathon but her first around the iconic course.

“I’m running for Blesma because my son, Matthew, was injured in Afghanistan and became a triple amputee,” said Rena (below) from Taunton. “Within a fortnight of his injury, Blesma was there with support and reassurance, and the charity has been there for him throughout.

“It has saved him, really, and there is always someone from Blesma he can talk to. Raising funds for them is a little way of saying thank you for all the support he and others have been given.”



Meanwhile, former RAF Nurse Sarah Clarke, who was deployed on three tours of Afghanistan, is also taking on the London Marathon for Blesma.

The 44-year-old critical care specialist was part of the intensive care team who helped save the life of Gurkha soldier and Blesma Member Hari Budha Magar, who became the first double amputee to scale Mount Everest last year.

“He was the first casualty I treated on my first tour at Camp Bastion,” said Sarah, from Plymouth. “I’ve kept in touch with Hari over social media and it has been inspirational to see all his achievements.”

Sarah, who served in the RAF for nine years and now works for the NHS at Derriford Hospital in Plymouth, is aiming for a time of just under five hours.



skills to tell stories, hold conversations and connect with other people in all sorts of situations.

“During the course we were paired up and told each other stories. I did mine matter-of-factly, but when we came back together mine came out in a completely different way, and I realised that the event I was talking about has had a huge impact on me,” said Coral.

The power of storytelling for improved wellbeing is gathering recognition, with research highlighting it as a trigger for the brain to release feel-good hormones such as oxytocin and suppress cortisol which influences negative moods.

“I really enjoyed the workshop and would recommend it to all Members. It’s confidential and is handled very well. I think it will help everyone, irrespective of what they have been through,” said Coral.

Storytelling workshops have huge positive impact

Coral Mackenzie, a former nurse, has taken part in one of Blesma’s new Storytelling and Wellbeing sessions. The 80-year-old Widow, who lives near Bath, has been amazed by the impact it has had on her and is positive about its potential for others.

“I thought it wouldn’t really be for me as I am talkative, but it is much more than that. It helps you get in touch with your emotions and express them in an engaging

way,” she said. “And it can illuminate what other people have been through: hearing other people’s stories helped me empathise with them.”

The Storytelling and Wellbeing programme, designed and delivered by The Drive Project, involves online and in-person workshops that guide Members in how to use language, their voice and their energy to express themselves. It teaches the confidence, techniques and

A number of workshops will take place in May and June. For details on both the in-person and online workshops, please email activities@blesma.org or visit www.blesma.org/activities



LEARN HOW TO TELL YOUR PERSONAL STORY WITH PANACHE

EXPLORE THE STORIES THAT MAKE YOU WHO YOU ARE

In-person: Wednesday 08 May

Online: Monday 13 May (10:00-13:00)

This exciting workshop will help you to explore the stories that make you, ‘you’.

MEET THE STORYTELLER

In-person: Friday 24 May

Online: Monday 20 May (13:00-16:00)

Ever wanted to meet a professional storyteller and experience a wonderful storytelling performance? Learn and

practise the skills of developing and performing an outstanding story with industry professionals.

EXPLORE YOUR SENSES

In-person: Wednesday 12 June

Online: Friday 07 June (10:00-13:00)

How can your senses lead to stories?

In the third and final workshop in this season, you can learn to tap into your memories to prompt and reveal the stories held within. We understand that not everyone has access to all their

senses, and the exercises will reflect individuals’ accessibility.

STORIES AROUND THE CAMPFIRE

Online: Wednesday 19 June (16:30-18.00)

Come together once more for an end-of-season sharing and celebration.

The in-person workshops will be held in London, the South East and East. The exact locations will be confirmed in the coming weeks

NEWS ANALYSIS

Blesma forges strong links with Hammers

THE ASSOCIATION HAS ENJOYED A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH NEARBY PREMIER LEAGUE FOOTBALL CLUB WEST HAM UNITED FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS. 2023 WAS NO EXCEPTION

West Ham United FC made it a match day to remember in December as they rolled out the claret and blue carpet for Blesma Members and sprang an added surprise for one passionate fan. The Premier League club laid on a training ground experience for three Members who are Hammers fans as part of their support for the Association's Operation Christmas Cheer that also delivered 225 hampers to socially isolated Members.

Members Barry May, Nigel Smith and Matt Weston were guests of honour at the club's Rush Green training ground and met manager David Moyes (right) and senior players who presented them with signed club shirts and Christmas hampers.

The club scheduled a Blesma awareness day for its home match against Wolverhampton Wanderers on 17 December but went one step further and hatched a stealth operation with West Ham TV.

"They came to my flat to do a bit of filming and I just thought it would be an interview with me about my support for West Ham and the club's links with Blesma," said Matt Weston (opposite page), a season ticket holder, who would watch the club's home games with his dad before his father passed away in 2022.

"But when they turned up there seemed to be a lot of cameras involved. Then, suddenly, Mark Noble stepped out from behind the lights. He was my dad's favourite player, a local lad who played for the club he supported and eventually became its captain – a total fan's favourite. It was a bit of a shock but a great one and an opportunity to meet a player my dad idolised, both for his on-pitch performances and his loyalty to his local club."

Mark Noble, who played 550 games for West Ham through an illustrious career, spent time chatting with



Above: West Ham manager David Moyes takes time to chat to Blesma Members at the club's training ground



Former West Ham captain Mark Noble (right) signed the shirt Matt Weston wore at his dad's funeral in 2022



Words: Danny Buckland Photography: West Ham United





Matt before signing the West Ham shirt Matt had worn at his father's funeral. He also invited Matt to be a pitch-side photographer at the Wolves game that ended in a 3-0 victory for the Hammers.

"It was amazing to meet Mark. He is a great bloke and character, and is a great example of what West Ham means to its fans and community," added former Royal Engineer, Matt, who lives in east London. "I'm really keen on photography so it was an added bonus to be invited pitchside. The action was close-up, with players less than a metre away at times. It was an incredible experience!"

Matt's father passed away before Mark's final match in May 2022 and the player told Matt: "It's an honour to meet you. It was an emotional day for me and it's a real shame that your dad wasn't there, but he was there in spirit. I supported West Ham as a kid and gave my life to the club, but you made a decision to do what you did... that was so unselfish and you're a hero Matt, let me tell you."

"It was amazing to meet Mark. He's a great example of what West Ham means to its fans and the community"

Opposite page, clockwise from top: Blesma's Chris Knight (middle), Matt Weston (right) and Barry May (left) go pitchside; Vladimir Coufal meets Barry May; and Kevin Nolan presents Members with their hampers Above: West Ham's Jarrod Bowen wears a Blesma top at training and Matt Weston filming in his flat for West Ham TV

The fans showed their support for Blesma on match day during the Wolves game by donating £760 in a collection that went some way to funding the hampers that were delivered over Christmas.

"West Ham and its incredible fans have always been very supportive of Blesma and those hampers were full of goodies such as chocolates, biscuits, tea and coffee, puzzle books, a Christmas card and decorations," said Chris Knight, Blesma's Corporate and Regional Fundraising Manager.

"As we all know, Christmas should be a special time of year, but unfortunately that isn't the case for everyone. Being alone at that time of year is difficult. When a Blesma Member received a hamper from our 'Operation Christmas Cheer Appeal', we hope it gave them a huge boost to realise that somebody who doesn't know them was thinking about them at Christmas.

"We wanted to make sure Blesma Members who were going to be alone at Christmas received a hamper so we were hugely grateful to anyone who donated to the campaign.

"And it is absolutely fantastic to have the support of West Ham and their fans. Over the last few years, the club has been magnificent and very generous with its support to the Association," said Chris. "We really cherish our close connection with the football club. It continues to support Blesma and our work, and you can see that the club regularly goes the extra mile for our Members."

↘ BLESMA BRIEFING

Support takes different forms

THE ASSOCIATION PRIDES ITSELF ON BEING ABLE TO OFFER BESPOKE SUPPORT TO MEMBERS EXPLAINS BSO (PROSTHETICS) BRIAN CHENIER



Brian Chenier
BSO (Prosthetics)

Blesma provides wide-ranging and varied support to its Members through its dedicated team of Support Officers (BSO) and Outreach Officers (OO), as well as the various departments – from fundraising to activities – based in Chelmsford.

For most Members, their BSO will be the person they initially approach for support, advice or guidance. The BSO will then decide how best to approach each unique request or situation. It may be answering a simple question, referring that person to a staff member with the relevant expertise, or putting them in touch with an external organisation. Often, BSOs are called on to help with complex issues concerning healthcare, mobility, compensation or pensions, home adaptations or accessing statutory services. While many issues may initially appear similar, the impact and outcomes are always unique to each individual Member.

SPEED AND SENSITIVITY ARE ESSENTIAL

All cases are dealt with as quickly and as sensitively as possible. In 2023, Blesma provided 1,178 individual grants to Members totalling £1,170,000. The majority of these were for home adaptations and mobility aids. Meanwhile, Support and Outreach Officers conducted 677 home visits, while across the Independence and Wellbeing team as a whole some 13,500 contacts or communications were made with Members. Ten Members were supported at tribunals and 39 new referrals were made to the Association's confidential counselling service. At the same time, Outreach Officers nationwide delivered excellent local and online activities to help combat social isolation.

BSOs, supported by others, do all they can to offer practical support and advice. This could be providing a temporary wheelchair or submitting a grant request to fund a specific item or project. Grant requests are



considered on a case-by-case basis and the Association will do all it can to support Members where there is a need. Where appropriate, Blesma will seek the support of other charities or organisations, particularly when an application for funds is complex or the grant amount is considerable. Likewise, Blesma is often approached by Regimental Associations and other charities to support grants they are leading on. Again, each case is carefully considered and taken on its own merit.

The Board of Trustees is regularly provided with anonymised case studies to keep them aware of the work being done to support Members. The examples on the opposite page show how the Association strives to help its Members to lead independent and fulfilling lives, and highlight the breadth of support available to Blesma's Members.

If you would like to get in touch with your Support or Outreach Officer, or the relevant member of staff in Chelmsford, their contact details can be found on p68



WHILE MANY ISSUES MAY APPEAR TO BE SIMILAR, THE IMPACT AND FINAL OUTCOMES ARE ALWAYS UNIQUE TO THE MEMBER

Support comes in many different ways

PROSTHETIC WORRIES

1 Member was concerned after completing a successful trial on a microprocessor controlled prosthetic knee that they would have to return it to the Limb Centre and wait for a decision from the Veterans Prosthetics Panel (VPP) about funding it. The Member was worried about the implications of reverting to their previous prosthetic. The Support Officer explained the VPP process and engaged with the Limb Centre. The reassurance given was significant in reducing the stress and anxiety the Member was experiencing.

FAST-TRACKING SURGERY

2 A Member with service-attributable injuries required orthopaedic surgery but was told by the NHS that the waiting time could be as long as four years. Their BSO intervened and through liaison with numerous agencies and organisations, as well as advocating for the Member, was able to highlight the case. The result was an acceptance of priority need and the appropriate intervention was delivered within eight weeks of the BSO becoming involved.

SUPPORT AT A TRIBUNAL

3 A Member in receipt of a War Pension with additional elements had part of it removed at short notice by Veterans UK, causing distress. Blesma supported the Member to apply for a mandatory reconsideration, which was rejected. The Support Officer and Blesma's Benefits Adviser supported the Member to tribunal, and with their support the Member was successful at the appeal and the removed element was reinstated.

ASSISTANCE WITH A WHEELCHAIR

4 One Member was becoming less able to carry out activities of daily living in his own home. Despite having a care plan, the Member was still effectively confined to his home. He wanted to be independent and to be able to visit friends. Blesma commissioned an occupational therapist to carry out a full assessment, from which the Association then provided a suitable wheelchair. Blesma also assisted with the costs of a wet room and ramps to enable entry and exit from the home; all of which made a huge difference to the Member.



From painting to prosthetics, the Association's staff are committed to supporting Blesma Members in varied and vital ways

“
THE BSOs,
SUPPORTED
BY OTHERS,
DO ALL THEY
CAN TO OFFER
PRACTICAL
SUPPORT
AND ADVICE

HELP WITH FINANCES AND BENEFITS

5 Due to a change in personal circumstances, a Member had to re-furnish and equip his home. The BSO carried out an assessment and, working with the Member, identified what the priority needs were. Grant applications were submitted by the Support Officer for purchasing essential household items – all of which were approved – and the items were bought and delivered quickly. The Support Officer also conducted a review with the Member to discuss finances and benefits. This led to the Member applying for, and receiving, the appropriate state benefits.

LIAISING WITH A LOCAL AUTHORITY

6 A Support Officer conducted an initial home visit with a new Member. During the visit an assessment of their finances was carried out and it was established that they may be entitled to claim state benefits. Some issues with the suitability of the home (a Local Authority property) were also identified as the Local Authority had yet to make any adjustments or provide any equipment. The Support Officer was able to quickly engage with the relevant teams and the necessary work was completed within a week of the visit. All appropriate benefits were applied for and received.

Letters

HAVE YOU GOT SOMETHING THAT YOU WANT TO GET OFF YOUR CHEST OR SHARE WITH YOUR FELLOW MEMBERS? **SEND YOUR LETTER TO EDITOR@BLESMA.ORG**

FOURTH TIME LUCKY FOR JANICE'S JUMP

MY DAUGHTER, LISA JOHNSTON, HAS been a Blesma Member since 2016. Having served 17 years as a Combat Medic in the Royal Army Medical Corps, she suffered an injury to her left leg which resulted in an above-knee amputation.

Blesma has been an important part of her recovery journey, and she has been lucky enough to be given opportunities to try new things and rebuild her life as an amputee. I have had the privilege to watch her go from strength to strength, become more confident, and now live life to the full. Because of this, I wanted to raise some money for Blesma.

I wanted to do something a little 'out there' so I decided to do a parachute jump. I was approaching my 68th birthday and thought: 'Why not? I'm not getting any younger.'

When the time came, I was prepared. Unfortunately, we had a storm and the jump was postponed. I scheduled it a second time. This also had to be postponed due to high winds. The third time, there was thick fog. I was starting to have doubts, thinking that it wasn't meant to be.

On the fourth attempt, the weather was clear and I was given the go-ahead. Once on the plane, the final checks were done and we set off. As we arrived at 15,000ft, my instructor tapped me on the shoulder and we got into position. After quadruple checking that I was attached to him, we jumped. It all happened so quickly that I didn't have time to think. The adrenaline was pumping. I felt a mixture of fear and excitement, and realised that I really had just jumped out of a plane!

It took my breath away. I had to remember to breathe. It was very scary



when the parachute opened. One minute, I was falling from the sky and the next, after a big jerking motion, I was floating. It was so quiet while floating down that we were able to have a conversation.

Before I knew it, we were back on the ground and I was welcomed with open arms by my daughter. It was amazing but I also felt relief. With every postponement, my anxiety levels went through the roof.

Would I do it again? Yes, I definitely would. Lisa wants to do it with me next time. There's nothing she won't try. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, but I also think she wants to get to push me out of the plane!

I just wanted to say a huge thank you to the people who kindly supported me. They thought I was mad jumping out of a plane, especially at my age, but age is just a number, and Blesma is such a worthwhile cause.

Janice Colebrooke

"WE CAN'T THANK BLESMA ENOUGH"

I HAVE BEEN A MEMBER OF BLESMA since 1967, when I lost my left foot whilst serving with 1st Royal Horse Artillery in Aden and Yemen.

Last year, my wife and I moved from Glasgow to Hertford to be closer to our family. I can no longer get into and out of a bath so felt it would be easier to replace it with a shower to allow me to keep my independence and dignity.

I contacted my BSO, Kevin Long, to see if I could apply for a grant. Although I contributed to this, I would not have been able to get the work completed without Blesma's assistance. My wife and I can't thank Blesma and Kevin enough for what they have done for us.

I am so happy and proud to be a member of Blesma. I have met so many friendly and helpful ex-Service personnel over the years, and I still enjoy meeting up at the various events the Association organises for us.

Garry McNulty





Richard (right)
working on set in
his day job as an
assistant director

“YOU’RE A VETERAN, YOU BELONG HERE!”

I WAS SITTING IN MY WHEELCHAIR, and a colleague opposite said: “I have imposter syndrome.” She was well known for being one of the most creative and respected people in my industry. I got it. It blocked me from joining charities or accepting charitable help, and it had stopped my application to join Blesma.

Why do I feel like I have imposter syndrome? Quite simply, I have all my limbs, and it made me feel ashamed to join Blesma. I have to use a wheelchair as long-term standing or walking puts me in bed in severe pain for days. My consultant surgeon said it would have been easier to amputate my lower leg, but the possible outcome of neuropathy and infection was high, so they decided to leave it. As a keen triathlete, the news broke my heart.

The combination of paresthesia, PTSD and not having a functioning limb has made my life a misery. I have also broken my neck and escaped paraplegia by millimetres. With help from a Blesma Outreach Officer, my application was approved. Here is where my imposter syndrome kicked in again. I applied to go on a watercolour course in Devon, I turned up in my chair at the hotel, and there was a message on my phone: *we are in the pub*.

I entered the pub, worried that I would be called out for having all my limbs. Within minutes I apologised for being

‘complete’, and one of the ladies told me off for being stupid. The others agreed. I made friends over the next few days and learned to stop apologising for my injury.

On the second day, I mentioned I work in the film industry. I rush around on set using a wheelchair, or sometimes hurt myself by walking about without it. Then I had an epiphany with another Member, a lovely lady who was a Blesma Widow, when she said I did what her husband used to do – apologise for being disabled whilst still being active and working. She was right; I do not have to justify my existence.

This year, after a rough 2023, losing my father and family home, and with my mum in palliative care, I have decided to be selfish for once, to engage in more activities with Blesma and not apologise for having all my limbs.

That watercolour course taught me art and painting, but it also taught me that Blesma Members understand where you are and how you are coping; it is a family. It gave me the courage to go back to the film set and not worry about getting out of my chair to greet John Cena or Vin Diesel. John Cena spotted me one day and said to me: “You’re a veteran, you belong here.” Sod this imposter rubbish; yes, I do belong here – even though I might have the slowest vehicle on the *Fast and Furious* set!

Richard Cave

MUSEUM VISIT BRINGS TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE

WHAT A SMALL WORLD WE LIVE in. It does not matter where you are, there’s always the chance of meeting one of the regimental family.

I was staying in the Thoresby Hall Hotel with my wife for our 53rd wedding anniversary when we decided to visit the local military museum. When I saw one of the curators I had a pleasant surprise and asked him if he was Robert Osborn, who was one of my men in the Scots Guards.

Ossie is now Assistant Curator for The Queen’s Royal Lancers and Nottinghamshire Yeomanry Museum,



and we spent a considerable time going down Memory Lane.

Ossie was knowledgeable on every aspect of the museum, and also traced my wife’s great grandfather’s final resting place in France on his computer, with details of where he fell during WWI and the cemetery south west of Arras where his body is buried. The icing on the cake was when he gave me a signed copy of his book.

Ossie is a below-knee amputee who lost his leg in the Falklands War, but you would not know he wears a prosthesis. Being an above-knee amputee and not as mobile, it was great to see him cutting about.

Bob MacDonald

Activities

WHETHER IT'S GLAMPING, GOLF OR COOKING ON A CULINARY RETREAT, BLESMA CAN HELP YOU FIND YOUR NEW FAVOURITE THING IN 2024. AND EVEN BETTER, IT IS ABSOLUTELY FREE!

From glamping in Somerset to skiing in Colorado, cycling in New York to fitness in Spain, with lots of other amazing activities in between, Blesma is giving Members the chance to experience all kinds of activities this year – and they're all for free! Take a look at the choices below and apply online at www.blesma.org or by emailing the Activities Team on eventsca@blesma.org.

Please be aware that dates are subject to change and that Members are expected to share a room on each event unless otherwise specified or the Activities Team have been contacted beforehand with viable reasons.

Why not sign up to Blesma's Activities email newsletter to stay up to date with all the upcoming events and date changes? Please email eventsca@blesma.org and asked to be added to the subscription list.

COUPLES WEEKEND LONDON

Location: London

Date: 09-12 August

Application deadline: 15 April

A fabulous weekend break for Members and their spouse or partner to explore the capital. Members will have the chance to meet other couples within the Association and experience some of London's finest attractions whilst enjoying some precious time spent together as a couple.

Who can apply?

Any Member and their spouse/partner. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.

GLAMPING NORTH WEEKEND

Location: TBC

Date: 17-21 August

Application deadline: 15 April

The aim of the event is to engage with other Members and their families, and allow you to share in some of the friendships our Members enjoy whilst being in the great outdoors. Spouses, partners, carers, children and grandchildren are all welcome.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a family of between two and six people (i.e. Member and up to five others). Please note that whilst there is no minimum age to apply, some activities are restricted to an age limit. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.

COUPLES GLAMPING

Location: Somerset

Date: 20-23 September

Application deadline: 01 May

A weekend break for Members and their spouse/partner to spend some quality time together as a couple.

Who can apply?

Any Member and their spouse/partner. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.

FAMILIES CHRISTMAS EXTRAVAGANZA

Location: Secret Location

Date: December

Application deadline: 01 August

Join us for a mesmerising top-secret Families Christmas Extravaganza where you will have the opportunity to experience the magic of Christmas with your loved ones like never before.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a family of between two and six people (i.e. Member and up to five others).





Apply online now at blesma.org or by emailing eventsca@blesma.org

Get your fix of winter sports adventures

WINTERSPORTS LA PLAGNE

Location: La Plagne, France

Date: January 2025

Application deadline: 15 August

Our fully adaptive ski week returns.

Working with adaptive ski instructors, the event will include sit-ski, stand-up, snowboard and ski biking.



Who can apply?

Everyone, but Members new to skiing or who haven't skied in the past five years must complete our try-out day prior to selection. Carers are not able to ski.

Requirements: You must have at least three months' validity on your passport at the time of travel.



COLORADO SKI SPECTACULAR

Location: Breckenridge, USA

Date: December

Application deadline: 01 August

This annual event run by Disabled Sports USA is one of the world's biggest and best ski spectaculars for all adaptive winter sports. The perfect week to have fun on the slopes. Mono ski, stand-up, snowboarding and 3 track will all be available.

Who can apply?

Most injury types can be catered for on the slopes. However, hotel rooms are not adapted and you must be able to use a bath.

Requirements:

You must be able to enter the USA. Your passport must be valid for the proposed duration of your stay in the USA.

Activities

Apply online now at blesma.org or by emailing eventsca@blesma.org

Golf UK

Location: Carden Park

Date: 27-29 September

Application deadline: 15 May

Members will be able to enjoy three rounds of golf that will be spread across three days at Carden Park Golf Resort in Cheshire. The resort boasts two championship courses. Accommodation will be provided at the hotel and there will also be a friendly match, making it open to all.

Who can apply?

Any Member with a set of golf clubs. Please state your golf handicap when you apply if you have one.



Remembrance Weekend

Location: London

Date: 09-10 November

Application deadline: 15 June

Join the annual Remembrance Parade in London. The weekend always marks one of the most poignant events in the calendar. Blesma makes a weekend of the occasion, with a social gathering on the previous evening and a hearty lunch before departure.

Who can apply?

Any Member and their spouse/partner/carer. Members are not expected to share rooms with other Members.



Fitness and Lifestyle Course

Location: Fuerteventura, Spain

Date: 15-23 November

Application deadline: 15 July

A chance for a reset and a health change. Get moving together and experience the beauty that Spain has to offer whilst trying out new activities. Improve your diet and learn tips on how to balance your lifestyle. This week will have a variety of activities including yoga, pilates, cycling, coasteering, paddleboarding and golf.

Who can apply?

Suitable for any Member.

Requirements:

Your passport must have at least three months' validity during the time of travel.



Apply online now at blesma.org or by emailing eventsca@blesma.org

RIDE TO THE WALL

Location: Burton upon Trent

Date: 04-05 October

Application deadline: 01 July

Join the Blesma crew on this poignant and meaningful motorcycle ride in memory of the fallen. Fittingly, the ride will finish at the National Memorial Arboretum.

Who can apply?

Any Member with their own motorcycle.

COOKERY RETREAT

Location: Oxfordshire

Date: October

Application deadline: 01 June

This is a new addition to the Blesma calendar, and one which will give Members (along with their partners) the chance to try something different. During the retreat you will have the opportunity to

take part in a number of cookery classes that will help you become more creative in the kitchen. Members will learn how to prepare meals that are healthy, satisfying and fun to make whilst spending some quality time with their partner.

Who can apply?

Any Member and their spouse/partner.

HORSE RIDING

Location: TBC

Date: September/October TBC

Application deadline: 01 June

A week-long event that will allow you to experience riding in amazing countryside. This is an opportunity to get back to basics and enjoy being out in nature on horseback.

Who can apply?

Anyone. Members will be expected

to have riding experience or to have completed one of our try-out days.

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN FITNESS AND NUTRITION?

We are looking at designing a series of fitness and lifestyle courses based around cooking and nutrition, meditation, yoga and flexibility, and bespoke training. These will run throughout the year.

If you would like to register your interest and stay up to date with future plans please email eventsca@blesma.org.



Discover the thrill of scuba diving

TRY DIVES

Location: Lord Wandsworth College, Hampshire

Date: 21 September

Application deadline: 01 June

Learn to dive with experienced dive instructors in the safety of dive pools whilst working towards your PADI qualifications.

Who can apply?

Any Member, but this will be subject to medical clearance.

SCUBA DIVING

Location: TBC

Date: October

Application deadline: 01 July

A great chance to enjoy some of the world's best scuba diving in warm water. You can dive for fun or work to pick up a number of diving qualifications. If you've never dived before or need some refresher training, then a team of highly qualified instructors will take you through everything you need to know at a weekend training session in the UK prior to the trip. Complete novices are welcome, however, please note that you will have to attend and undertake the mandatory training beforehand.

Who can apply?

Anyone who can move up and down stairs on a 60ft dive boat with minimal assistance.

Requirements:

You must be able to enter Egypt and your passport must have at least six months' validity from the date of travel.

GIVE IT A TRY!

Blesma will be running a series of 'Intro to' activities throughout the year to allow Members to try some of our main calendar events. The dates of these will be published on our mailing lists and in the magazine. Events include, but are not limited to, skiing, horse riding, sailing, golf, diving and cycling. Stay in the loop and register your interest at eventsca@blesma.org.

Greek Regatta

Location: Greece

Date: 14-22 September

Application deadline: 15 May

This is a chance to learn to sail in the Mediterranean. Beginners will be able to gain the first level of a yachting qualification, while those with more experience can simply enjoy lots of great sailing.

Who can apply?

Anyone can apply but you must be physically fit and a confident swimmer in open water. The boat is not wheelchair accessible and Members must be able to move around with minimal assistance on a 40ft non-adapted boat. Members must state if they are unable to swim in their application.




WOULD YOU LIKE TO PUT ON AN ACTIVITY?

The Activities Team is available to support you in organising an activity and can explain what you'll need to do. First, you will need to complete the Activities Proposal Application Form which is on the website, or you can contact aelocal@blesma.org.

You will be able to discuss the things you'll need to consider about the activity and venue to ensure everything runs smoothly and that Members/Widows are able to enjoy themselves in a safe environment. Is the activity suitable for those with limited mobility? Is the venue accessible and wheelchair friendly? Are there accessible toilets?

Blesma will pay for the cost of hiring the venue, the activity itself, refreshments and, where appropriate, accommodation. Please get in touch with the Activities Team if you would like to learn more.





Former soldier Stephan van Niekerk talks to Oleksii (on screen) who was injured serving in Ukraine's military

How Blesma is helping Ukraine's limbless veterans

SEVERAL BLESMA MEMBERS HAVE SPENT TIME WITH WOUNDED UKRAINIAN SOLDIERS TO OFFER SUPPORT AND ADVICE ON REHAB AND COMING TO TERMS WITH LIMB LOSS. THE CONVERSATIONS WERE RECORDED AND TURNED INTO POWERFUL SHORT FILMS



Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Andy Bate

Blesma Members have given their time to share their stories of resilience and rehab with Ukrainian soldiers coping with battlefield limb loss and injury. Members Mark Ormrod MBE and Stephan van Niekerk (right) were linked up with two Ukrainian soldiers to share experiences and advice about their journeys after severe injury in Afghanistan.

Titled *Conversations: Розмови* (the Ukrainian translation), the innovative project connects amputee veterans from conflicts thousands of miles apart in an attempt to minimise the physical and psychological legacies of war.

It draws on Blesma and its Members' unique understanding of how severe injury impacts soldiers and their families, and the importance of support throughout the rehabilitation journey and beyond.

Mark and Stephan were filmed in conversation with Vadym and Oleksii, who both suffered life-changing injuries in their nation's fight against Russian forces. The landmark initiative, which is being delivered by The Drive Project and features a website hosting the conversations in both English and Ukrainian, goes live this month (March) just as the toll of Ukrainian forces amputees reached 50,000.

"Ukraine is dealing with injuries and amputees on an unprecedented scale, and the legacy will last through generations," says Tony Bloomfield, Blesma's Operations Director. "Blesma's experience dates back to WWI, and we have deep expertise in helping military personnel come to terms with limb loss and loss of use of limb and understand that their lives are not over.

"Rehab is a tough physical and mental effort, and our Members all say that the support of other soldiers who had experienced similar injuries was critical to their recovery."

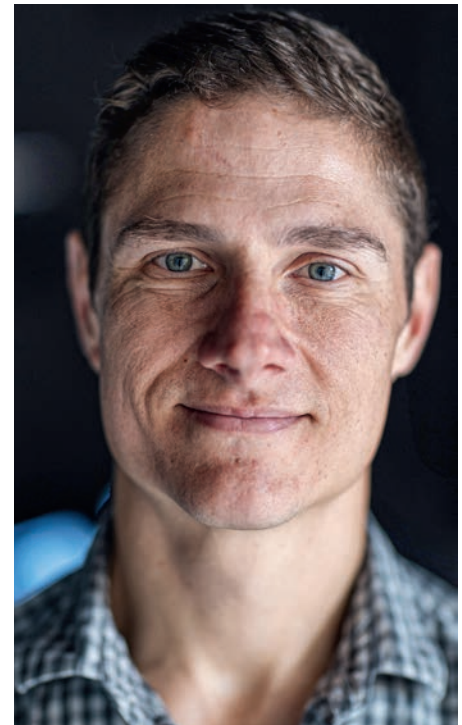


Former Royal Marine Mark Ormrod MBE

Mark Ormrod is a 40-year-old former Royal Marine who lost both legs and his right arm in an IED explosion in Afghanistan in 2007. "Finding military personnel who had experienced similar injuries but were further down the road helped change my mindset and opened my eyes to what was possible," says Mark. "It set me on a completely different path.

"Everyone who helped me played an important part in my recovery, but sometimes you have a question in your head that only another amputee can answer," says Mark, who has won multiple Invictus Games gold medals and set endurance records since his injuries. "This has now come full circle, and I can help others through this awesome project."

Mark, from Plymouth, spoke with Vadym, a Ukrainian Army paramedic who had his hands and feet amputated after being left for dead following a 2015



Stephan van Niekerk served in The Rifles

Russian ambush. "I have met Mark before, at the Invictus Games, and I thought he was a strong warrior," says the 40 year old, who is an adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on the nation's veterans' rehabilitation programme.

"Speaking with someone like Mark, who has real combat experience, makes a difference because he understands the physical and psychological problems of dealing with limb loss. Veterans will be inspired by him and what he has achieved.

"It is good to be part of this project and it is my mission to help Ukrainian soldiers live with their injuries. I was the only one of 12 who survived the ambush and, to make sense of it, I have to help others."

FINDING A BELIEF

Stephan van Niekerk was a 25-year-old Lance Corporal with the 3rd Battalion the Rifles when he stepped on an IED in Sangin Province, Afghanistan, in 2009. The double amputee has since become a sought-after motivational speaker, has raised funds for military charities, and is now in training for a 2,745-mile cycle ride from Canada to Mexico.

"After being blown up, I didn't know what my life would look like or what I would be capable of. There were all sorts

"MILITARY PERSONNEL WHO HAD EXPERIENCED SIMILAR INJURIES HELPED CHANGE MY MINDSET"





Stephan (left) and Mark catch up in between the live feeds to Ukraine

You can watch the short film of the conversations at www.blesma.org

of concerns and anxieties going through my head, and people were saying I might never walk again,” he says. “It was only when I met others who had similar injuries but were up and walking around that I found a belief that I could have a life.

“Listening to them, hearing their stories and understanding the challenges was vital to me, and it has been a privilege to take part in this project and help Ukrainian veterans,” says Stephan.

Stephan was filmed in conversation with 32-year-old Oleksii, who is still being treated in hospital for injuries sustained after a mortar strike, which killed one of his comrades, left him with severe internal injuries from shrapnel and needing an amputation to his right arm.

“That was in March 2023 and they are still removing shrapnel from my body today,” says Oleksii, who gave up a job as a successful software developer to enlist in the country’s Air Assault Brigade.

“I loved travelling, and my ambition was to have a house and family, but it seemed that was over with my injuries. Stephan shone a light where there was darkness. Hearing about him having a family, a business and a new life helped me realise that I do have a future. My rehabilitation is not over but nor is my life.

“It was powerful to listen to his story and I hope that one day I can speak to Ukrainian soldiers and help them in the same way. Just being able to help one person would be worth it.”

THE BOND THAT UNITES

Conversations: Розмови is being delivered by The Drive Project, the creative arts organisation behind Blesma’s award-winning Making Generation R programme and the Association’s new Storytelling and Wellbeing project.

“It was moving and inspiring to witness them all share their stories and see that bond that unites military personnel,” says founder Alice Knight-Driver. “There is a great power in storytelling, and it can



“Sometimes you have a question that only another amputee can answer,” says Mark

help people move from being a victim to having some control. Mark and Stephan were effectively showing Vadym and Oleksii that they can have control, and it demonstrated how powerful people can be when they work together. The aim is that the conversations are seen by as many veterans as possible and that will help them start to rebuild their lives with positivity.”

Blesma has collaborated with the Citizen Foundation, a charity dedicated to improving the lives of injured Ukrainian soldiers by securing treatment, prosthetics and psychological support.

“We are very grateful that Blesma is ready and willing to share its incredible experience to give us a better understanding of how to deal with veterans’ problems whether they are physical, psychological or everyday life ones,” says Olena Schmidt, President of the Citizen Foundation.

“Any injury affects us deeply at some level of subconsciousness. If we are talking about losing a limb, the major challenge is to accept yourself differently, learn to

live with yourself, learn to accept the new life taking a new form and meaning.

“Every veteran has his or her own story and their personal experience of getting back to life after their injuries – therefore sharing this experience is always useful. These are like cobblestones that help everyone pave their personal way to a new life. This is why I believe all the participants have gained something very important and personal in the process of this project.

“There is a term in psychology related to support which is called ‘equal to equal’. It means that information and advice is well received and contemplated if given by those who have the exact same experiences. This is because these bits of advice are given out of someone’s own experience and relate exactly to the situation rather than being read somewhere in a book. Therefore, the advice given from one veteran to another in these conversations will be extremely useful, not only to the participants themselves but also to those who will watch the films later.”

Conversations: Розмови will be made available via the Blesma website and the hope is that the testimonies of more Members will be used to connect with Ukrainian counterparts in the future

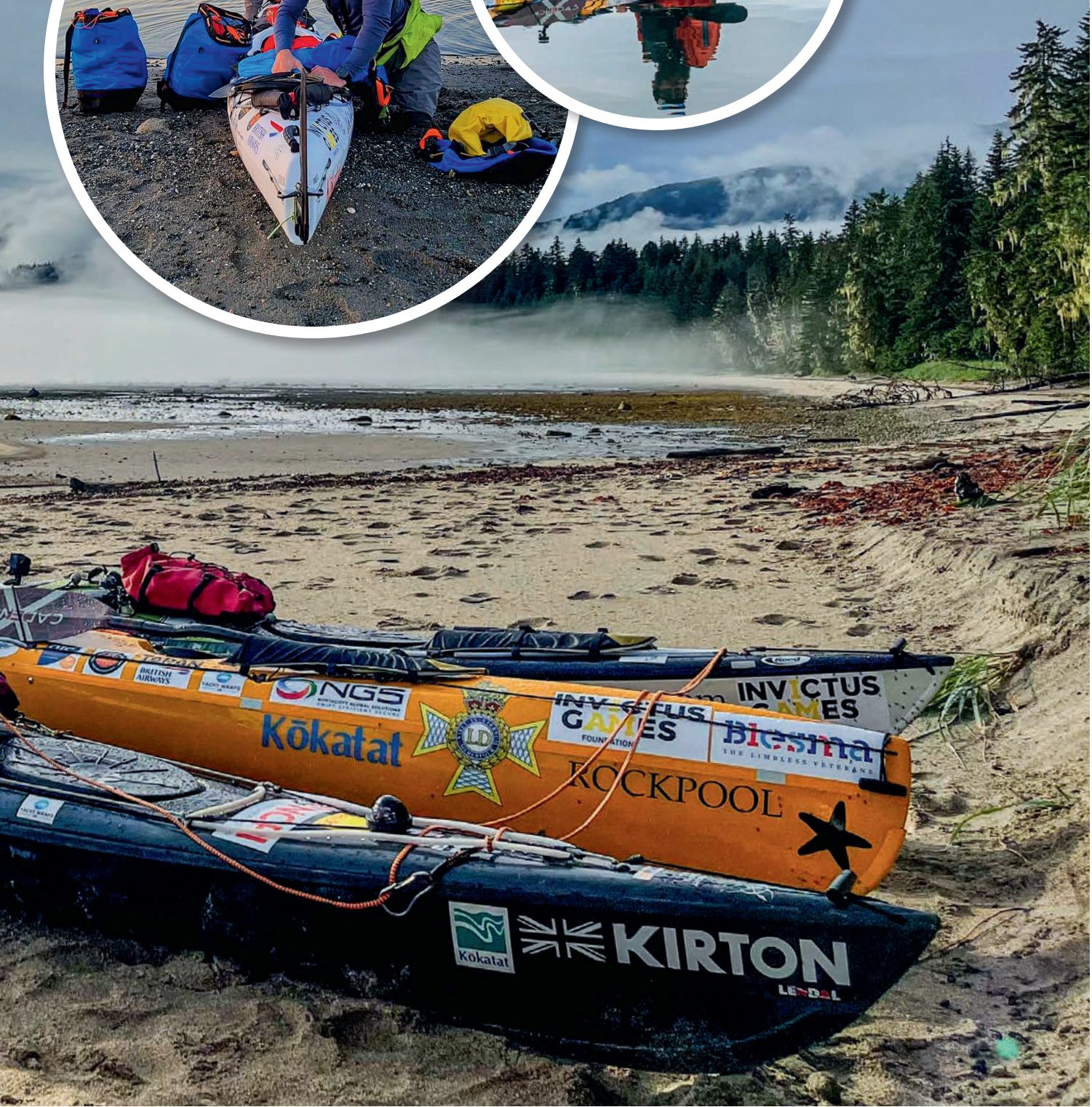
“STEPHAN SHONE A LIGHT WHERE THERE WAS DARKNESS. MY REHAB IS NOT OVER BUT NOR IS MY LIFE”

WELCOME TO THE MORNING COMMUTE

TWO MEMBERS WITH A THIRST FOR ADVENTURE WERE PART OF AN EPIC EXPEDITION LAST YEAR AS THEY KAYAKED 2,000KM IN FREEZING WATERS WITH KILLER WHALES, WOLVES AND GRIZZLY BEARS FOR COMPANY



Blesma Members Neil Heritage (far left) and Cayle Royce (left) on the adventure of a lifetime



Words: Danny Buckland



Sheer cliffs, snow-capped mountains, dense rainforests and treacherous glacial currents keep the senses on full alert as Members Cayle Royce and Neil Heritage kayak the 2,000km along the Canadian and Pacific North West coastline.

They often spend their days paddling with killer whales and seals for close company, 100kg of kit crammed into their finely-balanced kayaks, while wolves and grizzly bears roam the nearby forests and shores, making setting up camp each night a dangerous business.

The Inside Passage expedition, which was established to raise funds and awareness for military charities, took 89 eventful days to complete last year, but it was four years in its meticulous planning. Team captain Cayle and Blesma Trustee Neil, were joined by four other veterans and two civilians for a gruelling training regime around the UK's challenging waters as well as a trial expedition in Sweden.

The first of many challenges for the team was to adapt the sleek kayaks so that Cayle and Neil could steer without traditional fitted footplates. The next was to train the other members of the team – who had no kayaking experience – for the huge and dangerous undertaking.

“We trained extensively and prepared for the very worst because the weather can be notoriously bad along that coast,” says Cayle, a double amputee and former Light Dragoon Lance Corporal, who has rowed across the Atlantic Ocean twice. “The trip had its challenging moments, but we had prepared very well and were cautious.”

Cayle, who served in the military for 10 years, lost both his legs above the knee as well as part of his left hand when he stepped on an IED in Afghanistan in 2012. He skippered the first all-disabled British crew to row across the Atlantic Ocean and, as skipper on this expedition, was responsible for creating the route and handling the logistics.

“To be that close to whales, bears and wolves in such wild surroundings was an incredible experience for all of us, and it was a joy to be with such a strong team.

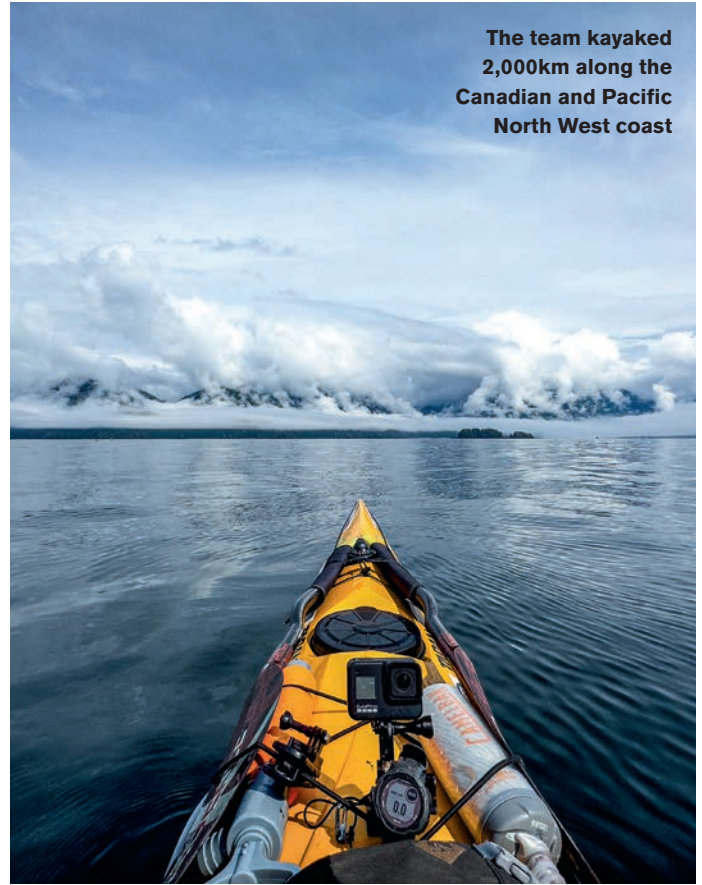
We all got an immense amount from it on a personal level, but we also did it to keep wounded veterans in the national and international consciousness.

“You don’t have to row oceans or kayak for thousands of miles to push yourself, but you can take on challenges that seem out of reach. We all strongly believe that you are not defined by your disabilities and, although there’s going to be limitations and frustrations, you can still be proactive and enjoy life to the full. Particularly when you surround yourself with like-minded people.”

WE HOPE THIS INSPIRES OTHERS

During Neil’s 11-year service he deployed to Bosnia, Northern Ireland and Iraq. He lost both his legs above the knee in 2004 following a suicide bomb attack while he was serving as part of a bomb disposal team in Iraq. In 2020, he became the first double above-knee amputee to climb The Matterhorn.

“The message we want to send out is that people with a disability can do things and we hope this inspires them. It may take a bit more thought and planning,



The team kayaked 2,000km along the Canadian and Pacific North West coast

but you can achieve goals you didn't think were possible," he says.

The expedition – from Washington State in the USA to Skagway in Alaska – was devised after a planned trip along the length of the River Amazon had to be cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The team's target then went from a tropical cauldron to freezing tidal waters that are fed by 200 inches of rain a year and torrents of glacial run-off.

"The route was definitely challenging as the coastline is immensely tidal and you are essentially weaving through a massive archipelago," says Cayle. "Due to the maze of islands and the enormous 30ft tidal range there were certain sections where the water would squeeze between these islands and hit up to 18 knots. You simply cannot paddle fully-laden boats against

eddies, whirlpools and rapids when your maximum paddling speed is around three knots. We had to get tides and times bang on every single day to avoid danger.

"One of the toughest days was an open water crossing of a seven-mile mouth of an inlet," recalls Cayle. "It had been raining for a couple of days and the temperature had dropped to around freezing. There was a strong wind blowing and freezing waters rushing down from glacier-capped mountains.

"By this point, our dry suits had taken some serious punishment so we were getting cold and wet – it got to the point where we were unable to feel our hands and faces, which made it difficult to handle the boats in rough conditions. If anyone had gone in the water then they would have been in serious trouble!

"We found a little rock of an island in the middle of the inlet and headed for it as the swell was rising and we were becoming hypothermic. We managed to reach it, got into the lee of the island for a bit of shelter, layered on some more gear, and necked what we had in our Thermoses before making the rest of the crossing.

"But for the most part the paddling was good and we enjoyed the scenery and the encounters with wildlife. Icebergs floated past and Orca swam nearby. At one point, a massive bull swam in front of us and its dorsal fin must have been six feet out of the water. It was phenomenal!

"Giant sea lions would check us out, and if they weren't too keen on us they would bark and thrash around us, usually when we least expected it. When it wasn't you they were harassing it was very entertaining to watch your mates do whatever they could to keep their boats upright whilst preparing to do battle with the 11ft-long, 2,500-pound beasts.

"There were eagles everywhere and we lost count of the number of humpback whales; whichever way you turned there were dramatic views – snow and glacier-

"ICEBERGS FLOATED PAST AND ORCA SWAM NEARBY. THERE WERE EAGLES EVERYWHERE AND WE LOST COUNT OF HUMPBACK WHALES"

“WHICHEVER WAY YOU
TURNED THERE WERE SNOW
AND GLACIER-CAPPED
MOUNTAINS THAT DROPPED
INTO THE SEA”



The expedition's
skipper Cayle Royce
(and his dinner)





In 2020, Neil Heritage became the first double above-knee amputee to climb The Matterhorn



“WE WANT THE EXPEDITION TO HAVE A LASTING IMPACT FOR OTHERS WITH DISABILITIES. WE HOPE IT WILL HELP AND INSPIRE PEOPLE”

capped mountains that dropped down into the sea with sheer cliffs for miles and nowhere to land.”

The team had to scout suitable sites to make camp for overnight stops, often hacking through dense vegetation and moving timber and rocks to create their own campsites well above the high tide line. Their neighbours were wolves and bears, so strict protocols – such as triple-bagging food, ensuring no debris was discarded and storing it all safely well away from the tents – were needed to ensure they weren’t attracted, and to leave no imprint on the pristine landscape.

“If anything, the paddling was the easiest part. It was getting all the gear up from the water’s edge and making camp that was the stretch after we’d been paddling for anything from seven to 12

hours each day,” adds Cayle. “Every time we landed at a potential camp, we had to do a recce to see if it was suitable before then unpacking all the gear from the kayaks and shuttling it above the wood line followed by all the boats. The “beaches” were mainly just sharp barnacle and weed covered boulders which added some excitement to the experience. Our longest carry was just shy of 2km from the water’s edge to the wood line. Only once this was completed could we clear the area to set up camp, which would take another few hours.

“Neil and I use prosthetics, so it was very difficult to safely carry the boats and gear over this terrain without damaging them. The boys did a brilliant job of helping us.

“And there was rarely any flat ground to pitch a tent so you could end up sleeping at 45° angles a lot of the time. Every night

we basically had some food and a bit of banter, checked the tides, route and weather for the next day and then conked out before repeating the process in reverse order the following morning. It was this daily grind up and down the beaches – pack, unpack, repeat – that was by far the toughest part of the expedition in my opinion.”

After three months of living like this, the expedition reached its conclusion, some 2,000km from where it all began, with the team raising £140,000 for charity.

“We feel lucky to have seen some incredible wildlife and scenery, and to have experienced this together,” says Neil. “The expedition took three months to complete but we’ve been together for years as a team through all the training and planning, so we have developed some really good friendships.

“We will never forget the experience on a personal level, but we want this to have a lasting impact for people with disabilities. We want to spread the word that you can take on all sorts of challenges, and we hope the expedition will help and inspire other people.”



“We work on the basis of looking at what we are lucky to have, and we’re lucky to have a lot,” says Liz Thomas

“WE ENJOY THE SMALL WINS”

RYAN THOMAS WAS A SURGEON LIEUTENANT COMMANDER IN THE ROYAL NAVY WHEN HIS AORTA RUPTURED CAUSING A LIFE-CHANGING STROKE. HIS WIFE, LIZ, LEFT HER CAREER TO STEER THEIR YOUNG FAMILY THROUGH WHATEVER CAME NEXT

Fast, cool and wow!” Ryan Thomas’ face lights up with a smile as he recalls the sweeping runs of La Plagne and the challenge of improving his sit-ski technique. “The food and hotel were great, too. It was all so good.” Ryan has aphasia so his speech is not fluent, but the joy that radiates from him as he talks is obvious. He has recently come back from Blesma’s ski week in the French Alps where the group were put through their paces every day by a dedicated team of instructors before enjoying the après-ski camaraderie of other veterans.

“It was a fantastic week for all of us,” says Ryan’s wife, Liz. “Because Ryan was so well supported and his needs so well understood, we could all relax knowing that he was safe. He loved skiing before he had the stroke and it was fantastic for him to be able to get out on the slopes and enjoy it again.

“He had been going through a particularly tough period dealing with his recovery and his sense of purpose, so the trip came at just the right time. He really loved it and loved being around other veterans.”

Ryan was living life to the full as a Surgeon Lieutenant Commander in the Royal Navy when, at the age of 37 and destined for higher rank, he suffered a devastating stroke.

It caused lasting cognitive and physical impairment, derailed his career and set his family on a difficult journey to recalibrate their lives and for Ryan to redefine his sense of purpose.

Ryan was fully committed to his family – his children were aged just six and four at the time – and to the Royal Navy, where he revelled in the demands of four-month submarine missions and being an integral part of Faslane’s HMS Neptune Field Gun team. But all that changed in an instant some six years ago.

“On the verge of starting a prestigious Masters’ course in occupational medicine, Ryan returned home from a regular day at the Institute of Naval Medicine in Gosport on 22 May 2018 and went to bed with a headache,” says Liz, who met Ryan just after she graduated in law from Southampton University where he was studying medicine after completing a pharmacology degree. “But in the middle of the night, I woke up to the sound of a crash. Ryan was on the floor trying to get



Ryan (right) on the ski trip to La Plagne in January

“HE WAS STILL UNCONSCIOUS BUT STARTED CRYING WHEN HE HEARD THEIR VOICES. IT WAS WONDERFUL”

back into bed. He was pulling things over as he tried to get back up, and it was clear there was something seriously wrong.”

He was rushed to hospital and needed 12-hour surgery on his aorta – the largest blood vessel in the body that carries blood from the heart – as it had become damaged causing a blood clot to travel to his brain. Initially, surgeons had to battle to save Ryan’s life and then to minimise the damage caused by the clot which had restricted oxygen supply to his brain.

“We had to wait for Ryan to wake up in intensive care to know the full extent

of the neurological damage,” says Liz. “He didn’t respond to anything for the first three weeks until I brought the children into the Intensive Care Unit for the first time. He was still unconscious, but he started crying when he heard their voices and we thought: *‘He’s in there, he knows something.’* It was a wonderful moment. When he did wake up he had no speech, and no movement on his right hand side.”

But the joy of having Ryan back was tempered by the reality of the difficult journey ahead. An initial period of rehab in Southampton Hospital was followed

by three months at Headley Court, where Ryan had spent time for his final medical training, and a further 16 months at The Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre at Stanford Hall.

“Our lives took a fork in the path and, because it was such an extreme turn, I don’t reflect back much. I don’t think it is helpful,” says Liz. “I don’t think we’ll ever quite get over what happened, so we look forward to each day and place a lot of focus on helping give the children the best life they can have.

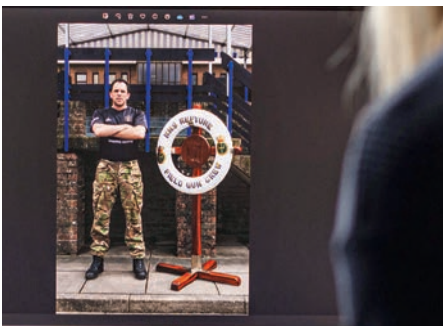
“We have met some amazing people and our lives have changed in different ways, and there are elements that I’m pleased have happened. We’ve met some really inspirational people who have become good friends.

“We’ve always had a very positive outlook and enjoy the small wins – such



as feeling grateful that the four of us are having our evening meal together.”

Ryan, 42, is keen to make a significant point: “I’m alive,” he says smiling. “But Liz is a legend. Liz and the family. I am so pleased.” He proudly shows video clips on his phone that chart his progress, from using a wheelchair through to assisted walking with parallel bars and onto



walking with only a stick for balance.

“I loved the Navy, all the training and being a submariner – I would have been in for life,” he adds. The service memories are vivid. They are a fundamental part of who Ryan is and a motivating force behind his rehabilitation, which hit a challenge when he was discharged from hospital a month before the COVID lockdown.

“We were due to have all sorts of support and carers and respite, but none of it happened. It was a tough time, and I’m not really sure how we coped,” adds Liz. “But it was also a very special time for our family because the children had more time with Ryan and it enabled us to learn as a family how this new life was going to be. It was very hard, but I love Ryan and we work on the basis of looking at what we are lucky to have, and we’re lucky to have a lot; we still have Ryan.”

Ryan’s need for one-to-one care had made ski trips with Blesma seem out of reach until they spoke to Jess March, Blesma’s Activities Manager, on a glamping weekend for Members and their families in Somerset.

“It was a great weekend, and having connections with other veterans makes a difference,” says Liz. “It was also good for the children as everyone there had injured dads or mums and it didn’t matter, everyone accepted each other for who they were.

“Ryan loved skiing before the stroke and we started talking to Jess even though we didn’t think it would be possible for him to get the right support to truly enjoy the ski trip. But she managed to get him one-to-one support and it turned out that Stacey Mitchell, who Ryan met during his rehab, was also going on the trip, so that was extra reassurance for him.”

FINDING YOUR PURPOSE

“When you’ve always worked and been in the military, working towards your next promotion or your next time away, it is difficult to lose that sense of purpose, and Ryan really struggled with those questions of: ‘Who am I and what am I doing?’” says Liz. “Ryan is generally quite motivated, but at the end of last summer he was particularly struggling with what to look forward to and stay fit for. Going to La Plagne gave him a purpose, and being with other veterans gave him an extra boost. They recognise what each other is going through and lift each other.”

His sense of commitment to his family and their future shine brightly, and his painstaking weeding of the garden flower beds at their home is testimony to his physical determination to challenge everything the stroke has thrown at him.

On a wall near the door of their house is a framed poster of inspirational quotes. Every one of them is a component of the family’s positive approach to adversity and the narrative of how the support of comrades can lift the spirits and defy physical odds.

“Veterans understand each other and we talk about the same things,” says Ryan. “In the Navy, I loved being a doctor and taking part in the field gun competitions. Most of all, I loved the camaraderie. It means so much, and we had that on the trip.”

“Hope and humanity always shine through”

FROM ESCAPING NAZI GERMANY TO HIS ARREST IN THE UK FOR BEING A SPY, HENRY WUGA HAS EXPERIENCED A GREAT DEAL IN THE 100 YEARS THAT HE HAS BEEN ALIVE. BUT WHY IS HE SO LOVED BY BLESMA'S MEMBERS?

The windows of Henry Wuga's home rattled and the air pulsed with shouts and offensive songs as the Nazi stormtroopers marched through the streets below. Fifteen-year-old Henry and his family watched wide-eyed as a savage frenzy descended on the streets of Nuremberg; passers-by were beaten up, windows were smashed and furniture was thrown from windows in the foaming epicentre of Hitler's malevolent empire.

It was the start of Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, when Jewish businesses across Germany were ransacked and synagogues destroyed. Some 30,000 men were arrested and sent to concentration camps in 1938 – nothing would ever be the same again.

As Henry approached his 100th birthday in February, the memories were still vivid and he shuddered slightly as he recalled what would be the start of a remarkable

personal journey. He was evacuated from Nazi Germany to the UK on the Kindertransport, was locked up just after his 16th birthday accused of being a German spy, and went on to become a successful businessman living in Scotland. Much later, he became a Blesma stalwart, volunteering on ski trips for several decades.

“I was very lucky to escape Germany, it was a terrible time,” says Henry, who built a respected catering company after settling in Glasgow following WWII. “People were being beaten up and homes smashed to pieces. I remember they slashed all the duvets so feathers were swirling around everywhere.”

Henry's parents wanted him to escape the country as anti-Semitism ratcheted up, and managed to secure him a place on the Kindertransport – the rescue operation that brought some 10,000 children to the UK from Germany between 1938 and 1939.

“Most of the children were aged six or seven and had never left home before so were very upset. They weren't crying, they were howling. It was a terrible



Henry and Ingrid were married for 75 years. Ingrid sadly passed away in 2020



Words: Danny Buckland Photography: Robert Burns



Above: Growing up in Germany in the 1920s, and (below) skiing with Ingrid

sound,” recalls Henry. “The older ones tried to comfort them but we were also terrified and that was made worse by the Nazi soldiers patrolling the train. It was only when we got to the Dutch border that they left and the atmosphere lifted. Kind women then gave us apples, sandwiches and hot chocolate.”

The children were put on ferries to Harwich and then transported to London’s Liverpool Street Station where they were put with families who had volunteered to care for them until it was safe to return home.

“It was still very daunting,” recalls Henry. “It felt a bit like a cattle market as people were coming in and choosing which children they wanted, and then the children would go off with complete strangers. Some brothers and sisters were separated.”



Henry eventually travelled to Glasgow where a distant cousin had helped arrange a home for him. “I was made welcome and no-one cared that I was Jewish; they just wanted to help,” he recalls. “It was all going very well but when war broke out we were evacuated to Perth and that is where my trouble started. I wrote letters to my parents back in Germany, but they were intercepted and I was deemed to be ‘corresponding with the enemy’.”

AN INCREDIBLE EDUCATION

At the age of just 16, and with limited English, Henry found himself in front of the High Court in Edinburgh, where he was sentenced to internment. “I was labelled a dangerous enemy alien, but was too young for internment so I spent time in remand homes before ending up at an internment camp on the Isle of Man.

“They were so convinced my innocent letters home contained coded messages that they felt I needed to be behind barbed wire. At one point, I got a new room-mate who asked me lots of questions and tried to get me drunk. I subsequently learned that he was working for MI5 to expose me as a spy. It was a traumatic experience but in other ways it was good as I was with a lot of older people – academics, artists, archaeologists and lawyers – and it was an incredible education. It was like a university for me.”

After 10 months and a series of tribunals, Henry was allowed to return to Glasgow where he met his wife-to-be, Ingrid Wolff, a fellow Kindertransport

escapee. They were married two years later and remained devoted to each other for 75 years, until Ingrid sadly passed away in 2020.

Henry was granted British citizenship in 1946 and built an events catering company with Ingrid. On retirement, they put their love of skiing to good use by helping Blesma Members learn to skibob. Henry was introduced to Blesma after meeting the Skibob Association of Great Britain's Ray Holland on a skiing trip. Ray was instrumental in both Henry and Ingrid becoming a core part of the team that coaxed Blesma's Members onto the slopes for life-enhancing experiences.

SELF-WORTH THROUGH SKIING

"Being involved with Blesma was an incredible honour and I met so many wonderful people who remained friends," Henry says. "Being able to help them achieve something that at first they didn't think was possible was a great feeling. You could see the positive effect it had, and that helped way beyond learning to ski. It was great to share those trips with people like Brendan West, Colin Rouse, Bob Monkhouse and Darren Swift. I have so many wonderful memories of Blesma and its Members."

Ingrid, who was awarded a British Empire Medal in 2019 for her services to Holocaust education, was also an integral part of the trips, with soothing advice for first-time skiers as well as expertise for the more accomplished.

"Ingrid, in particular, was fantastic at helping the Members gain confidence as many had never been on snow before let alone on skis. Ingrid was a very good skier, but she was excellent at inspiring people."

Henry and Ingrid were ever-present at the annual ski activity weeks in Austria for almost 20 years, staying friends with many of their fledgling skiers for years afterwards.

"We used to look forward to those trips immensely and we felt very privileged to have helped Blesma, which is a magnificent association, and to have been able to give something back," says Henry. "It was great to see how the Members all encouraged each other, often with dark humour, and their courage was clear to see. They were great fun. On one trip to Sölden, they stuck their prosthetic limbs in a huge mound of snow just outside the hotel so people just saw lots of legs

and arms in the snow. It was an incredible sight! What really stood out was how they shared everything with each other; their successes and spills and even their private thoughts. It was about so much more than skiing and we felt privileged to have played a part."

Their daughter Gillian Field, a retired scientist, adds: "Growing up, I thought my parents' lives were normal; in fact, they were anything but. Yet it was significant how they always looked forward, not back. They were always positive and felt the importance of giving back, which is why they volunteered for Blesma as well as a local hospice.

"They got so much from seeing Blesma Members, who often arrived on those trips with little confidence, achieve something. It was not so much about the skiing but more about the self-confidence and self-worth that the Members took away and used in their daily lives. Mum and Dad also got a lot from helping them come out of themselves, and many of those on the trips stayed friends for a long time."

Henry, who has two daughters, four grandsons and three great grandsons, was awarded an MBE in 1999, presented by the late HM Queen Elizabeth II, for his work with Blesma and for charitable fundraising.

"We live in particularly difficult times and it can feel depressing," Henry said on the eve of his 100th birthday (which he celebrated in February). "But you just have to get on with it and look forward. We may have to endure darkness for a time, but hope and humanity always shine through."



Henry and Ingrid (above) and on the slopes with Blesma skiers (left)

“They shared everything with each other. It was about much more than skiing and we felt privileged to play a part”

“I AM NOT PREPARED TO BE UNHEALTHY AGAIN”

CIARAN MUIR PRETTY MUCH HIT ROCK BOTTOM WHEN HE REALISED THAT AMPUTATION MEANT GIVING UP THE MILITARY CAREER HE LOVED. THEN HE STARTED TO BUILD HIMSELF UP, ONE REP AT A TIME

Former Infantryman Ciaran Muir was crowned a world champion in a whirlwind three months towards the end of last year. He entered his first bodybuilding competition and soon become

not only the British champ, but also the best in the world.

For the 33 year old, who lost his right leg in an IED blast on his first tour of Afghanistan, it was the culmination of a remarkable journey that took him from teenage tearaway to model soldier and then into post-service depression and near homelessness before he finally found a salvation in bodybuilding and running



a successful mentoring business. Ciaran, from Manchester, joined the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards from school and served for five years before an explosion in Helmand Province in 2009 changed his life. Here, he opens up about facing adversity, battling mental health and the gruelling regime of a bodybuilder...

Why did you join the Army?

It was the best option for me. I'd been excluded from school and had been in trouble with the police, so it was almost the Army or jail. It worked out pretty well and I thrived on the structure and routine. I never knew I needed that until I joined the Army.



Words: Danny Buckland Photography: PCA (Physical Culture Association)



“I’m an all-or-nothing person and have always found moderation difficult,” says Ciaran

Can you talk us through your injury?

I was 19 years old and it was towards the end of my first tour in Afghanistan. I was the guy with the metal detector who leads to check for IEDs, and I had done a pretty good job of it – no-one in my section had been injured until I was. We were on the way to a farm on some intel that it was being used to make IEDs and were moving into position when it happened. I lost my right leg and suffered severe internal injuries. My lungs collapsed, so they put me in a medically-induced coma before I was taken back to the UK a week later.

How did you cope in those early days after your injury?

At first, I just cracked on with an intensive rehab programme. I was in a really strange mindset because I didn’t process what had happened, and I was just focusing on getting back into service. Obviously, that was never realistic, but people aren’t in the business of discouraging you. After about a year, it became obvious I wasn’t returning to service. I pretty much downed tools with my rehab and told the Army I wanted out.

How was the transition to civilian life?

Really tough. I struggled with the lack of structure, and the civvy culture was completely different. I didn’t realise at the time, but I wasn’t in a very healthy place mentally. I was working in education using my experiences as a young person for positive change which was rewarding, but being out of the Army was a struggle and I did a lot of job skipping.

How did that impact on your life?

I developed poor relationships with food and drink. I’m 5ft 8ins tall and weighed about eight stones when I left the Army, but after time the weight piled on and I reached 20 stones. My marriage broke down, I lost my job and was sofa surfing in the space of four days. I found myself living in a third-floor flat with no lift and I would need a rest every three or four steps because I was so overweight.

How did you turn things around?

I’d had a good boss in a previous job who inspired me and gave me confidence, so I started my own company. There was

a snowball effect of pulling everything in my life together, so I started losing weight and getting back in shape. The problem was that I went too far the other way: I’m an all-or-nothing person and have always found moderation difficult. People were starting to say I was too thin and needed to put on a bit of weight.

When did you start bodybuilding?

It was only about 18 months ago. I’d been going to the gym regularly, but I needed something to work towards that would help me gain weight and so I entered a competition just to give myself a target. It helped and I gained muscle mass. Had I not had the competition to work towards, I would have probably drifted back to a life of takeaways. But I knew I had to stay lean and in shape.

What sort of training regime do you have?

It’s two hours in the gym five days a week working on specific muscle groups – and there’s a lot of eating. The only time I’m not eating is basically when I’m sleeping! It’s four meals a day and lots of snacks in



“The self-esteem that comes with achievement and being accountable are important,” says Ciaran

“MENTALLY, I WASN'T IN A HEALTHY PLACE. MY MARRIAGE BROKE DOWN, I LOST MY JOB AND WAS SOFA SURFING WITHIN JUST FOUR DAYS”

between – mainly eggs, bagels, chicken, rice, bananas and yoghurts. I can hit 5,000 calories a day, which is double an average person's intake, and it's a pretty boring diet. You have to build up over a nine-month period then cut out at least 1,000 calories a day as the competitions get closer. I have a coach but I really wasn't expecting much from the competition. The motivation it provided was the most important thing for me.

How did that competition go?

I won – which was a surprise! – and it qualified me for the British Championships a few weeks later. I was on a bit of a high, so I signed up for that and instantly regretted it because it meant I had to stick

to the diet and the training programme for a bit longer! I won that competition too, which then put me into the World Championships in Spain. That's where Blesma came in with financial support – I couldn't have made it without them. I won that as well and it is amazing to be World Champion; it's not something I could have dreamed would happen.

What positives do you get from bodybuilding?

The self-esteem that comes with achievement and being accountable are important, and with bodybuilding I have had to be accountable to my coach and to myself every day. My business has thrived over the same time, almost doubling in

size, and that's no coincidence. Every aspect of my life has improved.

Can your experience inspire others?

It would be great if people got something from it because too often we limit ourselves because of our experiences. If you take a step and face a challenge – and that doesn't have to be bodybuilding – then you will be amazed by what you can do. There's no magic pill, and you have to be willing to commit and put in effort, but everything worth having is worth working for.

What are your future plans?

I went into hospital in January for a stump revision operation that I had been putting off, but it had to be done. I'll be out of the gym for between four and six months, which will be very challenging as I was training religiously at set times and it had become a part of my life. But I've enrolled on a counselling course to keep my mind active and to keep myself accountable because I am not prepared to sit there and be unhealthy again. I will be back in the gym as soon as I am able!

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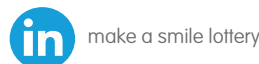
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Bulletin

Fundraiser proves that Blesma's got talent

Lisa Johnston wanted to give something back to the Association, so she put on a fundraiser worthy of prime time TV

I love Blesma and have been fortunate enough to participate in some wonderful activities with the Association. Because of this, I wanted to give something back as a way of saying thank you. I spoke to some of my Blesma buddies and came up with the idea of a Member-led fundraising event featuring Colin Thackery, the lovely Chelsea Pensioner who won *Britain's Got Talent* in 2019.

A Night with Colin Thackery took place in Sheffield on 25 November 2023. It started with the Yorkshire Volunteers Band and Corps of Drums marching into the ballroom as Colin sang *Jerusalem* – and the whole room sang with him!

The event took place in November, and to commemorate Remembrance Day Blesma's Chief Executive Vivienne Buck read out the *Kohima Epitaph* and *The Exhortation*. *The Last Post* was then performed by the buglers and was followed by a minute's silence.

Following the mini-Remembrance, the Band and Corps of Drums amazed us with an incredible performance. It was impossible not to tap, clap, or nod along



Colin Thackery (third from left) was the star of the show

Photography: Adam Johnston

to the beat. Next, it was Colin's turn. His powerful voice resonated throughout the room as he sang a variety of songs. Before each one, he shared a story or recalled a particular memory. Needless to say, he entertained us all with his cheeky, comical, romantic, heartfelt chatter.

Two of our North East Members also shared their stories. You could have heard a pin drop as everyone in the room held onto every word they said. It was the first time many of their family members had heard the stories, so it was very emotional.

A raffle and tombola were very popular, and items that Blesma Members had made

– ranging from home-made cupcakes and gingerbread men in blue iced jumpers to key rings and teddies with a variety of limb loss – were available to buy.

My son Adam, a budding photographer, took photographs all night, and in the run-up to the event a donation page was set up by Member Martin Turner, which proved to be successful. After a wonderful evening we managed to raise £3,907, which was then doubled in the Big Give Christmas campaign, giving a total of £7,814. With Gift Aid adding £976.75 we managed to raise a grand total of £8,790.75.

Lisa Johnston

“You could have heard a pin drop as everyone in the room held onto every word they said. It was very emotional”

Diving in the Maldives shows how far Members have come

Last December, eight experienced Blesma divers flew to the Maldives to take part in a scuba diving expedition to support Diving with the Injured, a charity run from the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham. The aim was to offer help, encouragement and instruction to nursing staff at the hospital who had recently qualified as divers, and to showcase how far the Blesma Members had come on their own recovery pathways.

The project has been running for several years, the overarching idea being that those who have provided medical care to veterans who have been affected by traumatic injury get to witness first-hand those who have had the surgery and progressed beyond initial recovery. Medical staff rarely get to see or experience this part of a patient's journey, and this reinforces the idea that providing care to the most seriously injured, with all the associated stress, really is worth it.

Over the years, the expeditions have taken place in different locations, from Thailand and Egypt to Djibouti and the Maldives. The location is constantly evaluated to give the Members different experiences and to ensure that the conditions are demanding yet enjoyable.

Part of the team on this expedition were senior members of the British Sub-Aqua Club's Diving for All programme, which deals with adaptive diving. This allowed Blesma Members to learn a little more about presenting their skills to those who are not affected by physical diversity and about how different training organisations approach the subject. The project is an immensely positive experience in which everyone who takes part learns, progresses and enjoys their time together.

A company called Emperor Divers have been used for recent trips as their boats, facilities, staff, attitude and general willingness to provide an excellent service have proved to be outstanding.

The first day was spent travelling before the diving started the next morning with a standard check-out dive to confirm



The divers were treated to close-up encounters with a variety of sharks and marine life



weighting and perform equipment checks. The week quickly accelerated and the four-day made the time to pass quickly – before we knew it the week was over and it was time to pack up and start the long journey home.

There are strong currents in the Maldives – the dive sites tend to be located in channels where the current is either leaving or entering large lagoons because it is this current that attracts marine life to feed. We were lucky enough to see manta rays on two occasions as well as grey reef,

white tip and silver tip sharks. Some 20 dives (including night dives) were conducted over the week and left everyone smiling. The maximum depth reached was 30 metres, which is the recreational depth limit for diving in the Maldives.

Blesma divers did themselves and the Association proud. Thanks to all for attending and thank you to Colonel Mark Foster for having the idea and skills to develop this particular project; it really is immense.

Matt Goodwin



It doesn't take long to feel like a Member of the pack!

My first trip with Blesma was some 10 years ago. For any Member, that first trip away is daunting, but it isn't long before a first-timer is made to feel like a member of the pack. Before long, new friendships and common bonds appear with those who have been through some of the toughest battles.

This January's ski trip to La Plagne in the French Alps began in a similar vein, and as the mountain road wound up to the snow-covered chalets and log cabins it felt like Christmas had been extended.

Former Guardsman Kev Alderton led the welcome brief with clear direction and encouragement, explaining the range of activities that would be on offer; skiing, snowboarding, ski bikes, sit-skiing and ziplining, along with many social activities.

There was a real range of abilities within the group, from total novice to expert, but we each had our own instructor who came with several years' of experience working with Blesma Members at this event.

The days were well planned with no rush; a buffet breakfast at 07:00, before our instructors met us at 09:15. There were beginner slopes near the resort, bigger pistes and mountain-top descents, and off-piste runs and sports arenas that included half-pipes and jumps.

SETTING (AND SMASHING) GOALS

We were asked to write our goals down at the beginning of the week, and there was a real structure to reaching what each skier and snowboarder wanted to achieve. The instructors were well versed in pushing the envelope, as everyone began to choose the more challenging routes and develop their skills. Evening meetings with Kev and the team would give participants a chance to share their journey and plan the next day's activities.

Exciting conversations about amazing views, action, speeds and new skills filled the bar every evening. As each day passed, every member of the group became more and more confident in their ability, and by the final day all the Members had

achieved their goals and exceeded their own expectations.

The team were joined once again this year by wonderful American disability ski expert Ed Brondson. His approach and representation opened many doors and, along with helping with the planning of the supported ski activities, he helped to cater for the unforeseen needs of individuals and ensured a safe yet challenging trip.

Away from the pistes, a well-earned rest midway through the week allowed Members to explore the town of La Plagne

and its many bars and restaurants. Then, on the Thursday evening, there was the opportunity to zipline across a steep valley some 600 metres into the local village. This was an activity that brought the Members closer together, and the group's camaraderie enabled everyone to take part in what was an adrenaline-packed event.

The winter trips come at a great time for many Members, giving them a chance to relax after what can be a stressful and sometimes lonely festive period. I love seeing new faces joining these trips and



Besides all the adrenaline there was plenty of time to relax and get to know each other

A week of blue skies, clear seas and sandy beaches

hearing about how each Member has overcome their fears and doubts to achieve so much during the eight-day excursion. I am sure I speak for everyone when I say that this trip will remain fresh in our minds – the views, crisp snow and smell of pine forests will be a backdrop for the new friendships and bonds created.

Kirk Bowett

If you would like to learn more about Blesma's winter sports activities email the Activities Team at activities@blesma.org



The views were straight out of a Xmas film



Blesma's last sailing trip to the south Ionian was four years ago and it was good to be back! Eight Blesma Members flew out to Preveza on 17 September and were driven to the sailing base at Vounaki. We split into two crews and joined our 40-foot sailing yachts. A buzz could be felt in the marina as we looked forward to a week's sailing in the clear blue waters of the Ionian Sea.

The next morning, after a thorough safety brief and a plan for the week, we learned both our yachts would be in the 'Marianne Flotilla' with eight other boats. Our first stop was Little Vathi on the island of Meganisi, a top spot in a picturesque inlet. The next day we sailed to Sivota on Lefkada where the flotilla staff held a quiz night for the boats followed by an enjoyable meal. The next day we headed south through the Strait of Ithaca, and found a sandy cove to anchor for lunch followed by a swim and snorkel. By 16:30 we had moored in the small fishing village of Agia Effimia on the south east coast of Kefalonia.

The next day, our flotilla made for Big Vathi on Ithaca, a large natural harbour with pretty houses, before our final stop at Aberlike, again on Meganisi, which had

a small harbour with a lovely restaurant and sandy beach. The next day we headed back and took advantage of the beach club where kayaks and dinghies were available to use. In the evening, the traditional end-of-week BBQ was held, offering a great banquet with lots of local dishes to try.

On our flight home, we were fortunate enough to be served drinks by the captain of our British Airways flight, who was familiar with Blesma – a fitting end to what had been a great week. A big shout out to Jess and Nicole in the Activities Team for their help and seamless planning of this event.

Nigel Smith



The clear blue waters of the Ionian Sea

Wales and West: looking back over a very busy few months

The run-up to Christmas was extremely busy, organising numerous Christmas lunches for our social groups and wellbeing support for Members, Widows and family members. The period between October and mid-December is always packed with Outreach activities and support work, but at the same time it is great fun and immensely rewarding.

Many of our Members look forward to the festive season but others dread it, with memories of family members who have sadly passed away or the intense enforced focus on ill health or lack of mobility. The Christmas and New Year period can be very difficult as many support agencies, including aspects of Government departments, effectively close down, with the NHS and GP surgeries also becoming harder to access.

However, many do enjoy the quiet time and look forward to spending quality time with friends and family. For Blesma Wales and West it was important to ensure that social lunches were enjoyed, and those who got in contact with the BSO for support received the help they needed in good time.

FESTIVE HAMPERS

The Blesma Fundraising Team was given a selection of Christmas hampers at the end of 2023, and after liaising with BSO Tom Hall and Outreach Officer Jason Suller more than 30 were sent to our isolated and deserving Widows. They were a welcome surprise at a difficult time of year. Blesma continues to work with partners across the UK, and the hampers are just a small part of the fabulous work that the fundraising team at Chelmsford continues to do.

WELLBEING SUPPORT AND ADVOCACY

Tom continues to visit new Members to welcome them to the Association, assess their situation and offer the appropriate support. The area's membership has climbed from 263 in late 2017 to 308 in December 2023. This has come about



A range of prosthetics and equipment at the Swansea Artificial Limb and Appliance Centre



Members of the Swansea social group get together for a catch-up over lunch

through partnership working and getting the Blesma name out there. Partners and agencies are more aware of Blesma than ever and increasingly recognise the great work the charity does. Visits were also made to those who requested them or who needed welfare support. In this time of increasing need it's important to prioritise visits where they are most needed. Between late October 2023

and the beginning of February Tom visited more than 60 Members to offer help and support. Jason visited more than 15 Members and continues to work hard to help new Members join the Association.

The support given to Members has included garden works, bathroom adaptations, OT assessments, heating and home repairs, counselling support, help to access NHS treatments, DWP benefits, and help with the issue and recycling of mobility and disability equipment. Many Members struggle to get through to speak to DWP advisers and can be waiting on the phone for more than an hour at a time. Even when the call is finally answered, the Member can be cut-off or might not be able to resolve an issue. This type of work is time-consuming and frustrating.

CHRISTMAS LUNCHES AND OUTREACH

From late October to Christmas Jason organised and hosted 12 social lunches, including Christmas dinners for the Member social groups in Hereford, Cardiff,



One of many Christmas dinners the area hosted – this one was in Gloucester



Tom visits new Member Norman Alexander to make sure he has what he needs

Swansea and Gloucester, and pantos for Members and their families across the area. Real camaraderie is forming amongst these groups and that is starting to be replicated in the West and North of Wales, including areas in the Wirral and Deeside. A crucial element to developing these groups will be more access to Blesma volunteers, which is currently a priority for the Association. Volunteers will be



Time to get together over lunch again – this time to celebrate Halloween

able to help Outreach in galvanising Members and encouraging attendance and connection between the membership.

A FOCUS ON MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

With the increasing pressure on mental health services, the increase in isolation since Covid and the rising awareness of wellness across our population, it is

perhaps more important than ever to focus on resilience, self-help, access to physical activity and the need to look out for others. Poor mental health seems to be on the rise, but what we increasingly see in our day-to-day work is the remarkable effect of Members coming together to enjoy each other's company, get involved in activity and benefit from social connections.

Having something to focus on, being able to leave the house, having a social network and thinking about the things that can be done rather than the things that can't all seem to be catalysts to stronger resilience and improved mental health. There are things that Blesma staff, our Members and their families cannot control, and access to good quality mental health support is now more difficult than ever due to stretched NHS services and lack of access to GPs.

However, if we can avoid isolation, have activities and groups that we can access, and have better awareness of how our daily choices will affect our mental health, then things could improve without having to burden the already creaking services around us.

Connecting and getting more involved in working with others to improve our community services, social connection and access to activities and events is key. This can include volunteering, fundraising, taking part in the activities on offer or just being part of a social group in your area (or perhaps even starting one!), and using Blesma to give a sense of pride and fulfilment in being part of a wider family.

REFERRALS

Clinicians and partners can contact Tom or refer veterans in the Wales and West area to Blesma by contacting the Association at www.blesma.org or by using the Blesma Wales and West Referral Form, which can be supplied on request. Please contact Tom or Jason using the details on page 68.

Tom Hall and Jason Suller

Northern Ireland: From crafts to cakes to healthy competition

AT-HOME CRAFTING

Our Widows, spouses and carers love to get 'crafty' and put a little kindness back into the world over the winter months. Our Outreach 'At Home Project' was to craft warm hats and scarves to support two charities – Andy Allen Veterans Support (AAVS) and The Salvation Army – that provide local support to those who find themselves homeless. We also had the support of A Company 1st (NI) Battalion Army Cadets in Omagh who donated warm clothing and toiletries. Member Mark Rogerson has been spending time going out on the streets with members of AAVS, to help in their project.

INDOOR LAWN BOWLS

Who would have thought the gentle game of lawn bowls could be so competitive? This was a new sport for us to try out at the Belfast Indoor Bowling Club and it certainly didn't disappoint. With two teams striving to win, we had lots of good-natured banter and great camaraderie.

THE SWEETEST DAY OF THE YEAR

Who doesn't enjoy a baking competition – particularly if it's fun for all the family? We were wowed with the creativity on show but there could only be one winning team. Congratulations to Harrison and Willow, grandchildren of Member Robert Beatty, on their Love Bug entry!

HELLO SPRING

We joined forces with a few Scotland Members and took to Zoom, reminding ourselves that after every winter comes spring. We had the opportunity to learn how to create and craft dried flower wreaths, all in time to welcome spring.

LET'S GET ARTY

I love to set a challenge, and the motto for the day was: 'There is no right way, there is no wrong way, there is only *your* way'. The challenge to create something worthy of wall space. Art teacher Phil had



The winning team after a very competitive day at the Belfast Indoor Bowling Club



Widow Renee Crilly mixing it up during the arts and crafts challenge

an abundance of patience, humour and encouragement which, in turn, brought out the confidence in everyone.

VETERANS AWARDS

Blesma will be the dedicated charity for this year's Northern Ireland Veterans Awards which will take place in Belfast later in the year. Meanwhile, following on



Winning love bugs made by Robert Beatty's grandchildren Harrison and Willow

from the successful two-year relationship with the Belfast International Tattoo, we are thrilled to be joining The Scottish Fiddle Orchestra to fundraise for Blesma as they undertake a short tour across Northern Ireland in May.

Fiona Morrison
Outreach Officer Northern Ireland

Area round-up: What's been going on where you live?

South

TREADING THE BOARDS FOR BLESMA

David Yates, who lives on the Isle of Wight and has been a Member for less than a year, took part in the Sergeant's Mess Panto in Deal in January and was quick to put Blesma forward as one of the charity beneficiaries to say thank you for Blesma's support since he joined.

As a former WO1 Royal Marines Band Master, David is no stranger to performing, but his role as Stinkerbell was definitely a little different from his time spent aboard the Royal Yacht and at a multitude of grand occasions whilst in service.

In 1996, following the closure of the Royal Marines School of Music in Deal, the annual Sergeant's Mess charity panto had to stop. Ten years ago, former Royal Marine musician Brian Short resurrected the tradition and each year puts on a panto with other former Marines.

Over the last decade the panto has raised some £275,000 for charity. The organisers were very happy to donate £500 to Blesma from the proceeds of the 2023 production *Peter's Pans*.

Amy Barnes
Outreach Officer

London and South East

COME AND JOIN OUR ACTIVITIES

Last year, we saw an increase in new members attending events, which was fantastic. We try to accommodate as many requests and needs as we can, and last year we put on activities ranging from white-water rafting to a trip to Harry Potter Studios to online wreath making.

Our January newsletter was sent out to Members and included an update from myself and BSO Steve Burrell, and listed upcoming outreach activities, with more to



David Yates with a donation of £500 from the Christmas panto he took part in

be circulated soon. We held four Christmas lunches over the festive period. It was great to see everyone enjoying themselves and engaging with one another. We also ran an online Christmas Wreath Workshop with the Bedfordshire Flower School. We usually run a Spring Wreath and Pumpkin Posy Workshop with them too – they make lovely displays in our Members' homes.

This year, we are celebrating the fourth year of our book club, a joint activity with the South, Midlands and South West areas. We meet every Friday on Zoom, and if you would be interested in joining please do get in touch. As always, should anyone have any suggestions for outreach activities, please let us know. If you haven't attended an outreach activity before, you would be very welcome.

Jess Linge
Outreach Officer

Midlands

NEW OUTREACH OFFICER

I joined the Midlands team as the new Outreach Officer last October and got straight into the fun of organising Christmas lunches for Members. A busy but fun time was had by all, with lunches held across the region bringing old friends



Members from London and the South East had a go at white-water rafting in 2023

together and giving the opportunity for new Members to get involved and meet their peers to celebrate the festive season.

I am looking forward to rolling out more outreach plans in the coming months, and Ness is always on hand to offer welfare support where needed.

Sarah Criddle
Outreach Officer

South West

WORKING TO REDUCE ISOLATION

Recent months have proved to be testing times, with the cost of living drastically reducing the chance for some Members to get out and do things, causing further isolation and loneliness. BSO Sarah has been visiting many of these Members and has paid a visit to several new Members. Along with this there have been a number of housing issues to deal with.

Elsewhere, Charlie and Susan Rowe had been struggling for more than 18 months to get the front of their home adapted for off-street parking. Blesma helped with funding that finally meant the work could be completed. The change was amazing and has made life so much easier and safer for them.

Over the colder months I arranged many different activities both online and face-to-

Area round-up: What's been going on where you live?

face, including seven Christmas lunches and two festive afternoon teas. The new year has already brought visits to the Swindon Steam Museum and a link-up with Limitless, the disabled cycling group. At one of these events, Member Stuart James was able to try out a recumbent bike for the first time and is keen to come along and try one again once he has had adaptations made to his socket.

The activities keep on coming, with everything from truffle making to horse riding on the horizon. Hopefully, there will be something for everyone! Over the last 12 months all our Members have been contacted by Sarah or myself, and that is something that will continue this year in the hope that we can help people to fulfil their aims and reduce isolation amongst our Members.

Gordon Clark
Outreach Officer

Scotland

RACHAEL IN AT THE DEEP END

A warm welcome goes to Rachael Kennedy, who started in the role of Outreach Officer for Scotland in December 2023. She was thrown in at the deep end, hosting several Christmas lunches across the country.

"I first heard about Blesma several years ago through a friend who had served in the Army," said Rachael, who trained as a primary school teacher but spent most of her time in education working with teenagers with complex and additional support needs. "I am already loving the opportunity to chat with Members and am looking forward to meeting everyone over the coming months."

So far this year, Rachael has hosted three lunches – in Glasgow, Dunfermline and Forres. "They were good opportunities to meet some of the Members and find out what sort of outreach activities they would like to see this year," she said. "Lined up for this year are favourites such as clay pigeon shooting, gliding, and a canal boat



Getting competitive at the North East sports trials in January



South West Member Stuart James recently tried a recumbent bike for the first time

trip on the Falkirk Wheel with the Seagull Trust. There will be some family activities during the school holidays, including a day at Lochore Meadows Watersports Centre with Fife Sailability. And we'll have lots of online and make-at-home activities such as a sunflower growing competition and cheese tasting evenings."

North East

GETTING STUCK IN

The North East started the year off with two lunches that were well attended; a delicious lunch in Pontefract and a wonderful cream tea at the Selby Garden Centre restaurant. Stories were shared

and support was given to new Members who were attending a lunch for the first time. Members are now beginning to arrange to meet independently to share their hobbies and interests.

Triple amputee Member Craig Wood only comes back to the UK every now and again, as he is sailing around the world with his partner and their two children. On a rare visit home in February, we organised a welcome home lunch for him during which he was able to talk with Members about his life and answer their questions. Craig is planning a fundraising venture for Blesma which will see him sail alone from La Paz in Mexico to Okinawa in Japan – a distance of some 6,000 miles.

Members in the North East also enjoyed a wonderful and very energetic day at Sheffield Concord Sports Centre in January. The event was in collaboration with WheelPower and Help for Heroes, and saw Members take part in boccia, wheelchair rugby, wheelchair tennis, wheelchair table tennis and ice hockey.

"It was a great chance to try out sports all under one roof and see activities that we might follow through with," said Martin B. "As always, it was great to catch up with fellow Blesma Members and get active – it's the kind of fun that rarely comes my way nowadays."

Ryan Higgins, who also attended the event, said: "I can't say enough how amazing Adele has been today and looked after us all as always. Anyone who is like me and likes contact sport should give wheelchair rugby a go as it's amazing. It was great meeting new people and, as always, the Blesma Members were great."

Lisa Johnston agreed: "When you have a life-changing injury, you feel limited in what you can do in the sports sector. When attending an event like this, I feel more optimistic in finding a sport I could take up and do on a regular basis. I would definitely attend an event like this again."

Adele Miller
Outreach Officer

News from the Branches:

Plans are in place for a lively 2024

BOURNEMOUTH BRANCH

Firstly, we must congratulate Chief Executive Vivienne Buck on the award of a CBE in the New Year's Honours List. It was a great pleasure to meet her at our Christmas lunch. Vivienne gave us a quick insight into what she intends to achieve in post, and we wish her well and support her wholeheartedly.

We had one meeting in January, and the Christmas lunch was discussed in detail. The consensus was that after 20 years at the Miramar, the venue could not be better but the lunch was not up to the old standard. However, we wished to continue and so will book for this year.

Our suggestion to link up with our friends in the Southampton Branch for an occasional joint venture has born fruit. The first outing will be to the National Motor Museum, Beaulieu on Sunday 07 April, along with a picnic tea. If you wish to attend, let myself or Outreach Officer South West Gordon Clark know. We have put forward some further suggestions for when the weather improves. Vivienne mentioned a Blesma Day at the National Arboretum in the summer; this is something dear to my heart, Stourhead when the daffodils are out is another. Any suggestions, please give me a call.

Our Branch AGM is at 10.45 on Monday 08 April at the War Memorial Homes, Bournemouth. All are invited, and this year we intend to have a buffet lunch, so if you are attending please advise us. You can find our contact details on page 69.

Peter Sherston-Baker

NOTTINGHAM BRANCH

The Nottingham Branch continues to flourish, regularly welcoming new members. The Branch Christmas lunch was held on 05 December at The Orchard Hotel and Restaurant. Some 30 Members enjoyed our first visit to this venue, set in the beautiful grounds of Nottingham University and Lakeside Park. We were also delighted to welcome Chief Executive Vivienne Buck, who kindly gave us an



One of many Branch Christmas lunches that were enjoyed over the festive period

insight into her background and an update on Blesma's activities.

We will be holding our 2024 meetings/lunches at The Vale Hotel, Daybrook, Nottingham on the following dates:

14 May at 12.30

09 July at 11.30

10 September at 12.30

12 November at 11.30

This year, we are also planning to hold a Branch and Blesma fundraising/awareness event at Thoresby Hall as well as a Branch summer evening meal. Dates and more information to be confirmed. If you are interested in joining the Branch, or would like to know more about our activities, please contact me on 07794 309927 or at secretary.nottingham@blesma.org

David Ledger

Hon. Secretary

SOUTHAMPTON, WINCHESTER AND DISTRICT BRANCH

The Branch has expanded due to the closure of the Portsmouth Branch, and we took on board some 18 Members and Widows. We hope they enjoy being with us. The Branch would like to congratulate Chief Executive Vivienne Buck on her CBE in the New Year's Honours List.

Sadly, members Brian Jones and Colin Wilson have recently passed away, and we sent our condolences to their families. May they rest in peace.

We were very pleased to be able to invite both the Lord Mayor of Southampton and the Mayor of Winchester to our Christmas lunch at the Woodland Lodge Hotel on the edge of the New Forest. The other guests were Vivienne Buck, Pat Donnachie (BSO South) and Amy Barnes (Outreach Officer South). We would like to thank Caroline Pedrick, our Social Secretary, for organising such a successful event.

Our Chairman, David Rowe, organises two trips on the boat the *Alison MacGregor* during the summer and if any Branch Member or Widow would like to attend, they should contact David on 02380 551891.

The Branch meets on every fourth Monday at the Totton Community Centre and enjoys listening to a speaker and having a buffet lunch. Should any Member or Widow living in the area wish to join the Branch, they would be most welcome and should contact myself on 01202 764168.

The Branch would also like to thank Pat Donnachie, Amy Barnes and Blesma HQ for all their support.

Stephen Coltman OBE

SUTTON, MERTON AND DISTRICT BRANCH

The Branch is blessed to have welcomed quite a few new Members and they attend the Branch meetings regularly. We hold five or six meetings a year which are very well attended. Blesma is outstanding with the activities it organises for its Members, who themselves are inspiring. Recently, our Branch Members have skied, taken part in a car rally to Gibraltar and ridden horses, to name but a few activities. Last year, Pete Turner, a friend of the Branch, successfully organised a number of trips to his home, The Royal Chelsea Hospital, where we enjoyed a delicious lunch in The Great Hall. What an honour for us!

This year, the Branch celebrates its 75th anniversary. We owe so much to the blind and limbless veterans who opened it in 1949, friends a few of us remember and admire.

Annie MacMillan

Spotlight on Benefits and Social Care

Welcome to the Bulletin's regular section on the benefits system. As well as highlighting some useful information regarding the benefits system, on occasions we will be raising awareness of some health and social care matters or other available support. Blesma Members can either contact their Support Officer for further information about their benefit entitlement or they can get in touch with Blesma's Benefits and Social Care Adviser Liz Watling on 020 8548 7080 or email her at iwabenefits@blesma.org. These contact details are for Blesma Members only.

COST OF LIVING PAYMENTS

The Government announced the payment date for the third and final Cost of Living Payment for those on a low income benefit. The payment of £299 should have been made between 16 and 22 February for most eligible people. If you are eligible you will have been paid in the same way you usually receive your benefit or tax credits. This includes if you are found to be eligible for the payment at a later date and your benefit is backdated. The payment is tax free and will not affect any benefits you receive.

You may be entitled if you get any of the following benefits on a certain date:

- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support or Pension Credit. You may be eligible if you were entitled to a payment of benefit during the period 13 November to 12 December 2023

Universal Credit

- You may be eligible if you were entitled to a payment of Universal Credit for an assessment period that ended in the period 13 November to 12 December 2023

Tax Credits

- You may be eligible if you received a payment of tax credits for any day in the period 13 November to 12 December 2023

In some cases, your benefit entitlement is reduced to £0 – for example, if your earnings went up or your benefit was sanctioned for not complying with a condition. You would not be entitled to a Cost of Living Payment in this situation.

If you have not received a payment and think you were entitled, you can report this online at www.gov.uk/guidance/cost-of-living-payment. If you do not have online access, please contact the Department for Work and Pensions on the telephone number at the top of your award letter.

Please note that the Government will not contact you to ask for your bank details, so if you receive any correspondence asking for these details it is likely to be a scam.

BENEFITS UPDATING 2024

Benefits are generally uprated at the beginning of each tax year. At the time of writing we do not have the confirmed amounts of individual benefits for April 2024 and we will publish these in the next Bulletin. However, for your individual circumstances you should receive an award letter by the end of March confirming your new payment, or if you are on Universal Credit you will be advised via your online journal.

The Chancellor announced in his Autumn Statement in November 2023 the Pensioner Triple Lock will be maintained. Under the triple lock system, the state pension increases each April in line with whichever of these three measures is highest:

- Inflation as measured by the Consumer Prices Index in the September of the previous year
- The average increase in wages across the UK
- Or 2.5%

In April 2024, the link to earnings under the triple lock will see the state pension rise by 8.5% as this was the highest of the three measures. Pension Credit will also rise by the same percentage. For those of working age, most benefits will rise by 6.7%.

LOCAL HOUSING ALLOWANCE

Local Housing Allowance is the rate used to set the maximum amount of either Housing Benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit that a private tenant can claim. The maximum amount varies by area and number of people per household.

It is meant to ensure that those eligible can afford the cheapest 30% of suitable private rental properties in their area, but it has been frozen since 2020, meaning it hasn't kept up with rapidly rising private rental costs.

From April rates will rise. This means that private renters who claim Housing Benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit will get more help with their housing costs, as the local housing allowance will be uprated to reflect current rental prices.

The rates are then expected to be frozen again in 2025. Please note that the Benefit Cap, which is the maximum income through benefits a claimant can receive, has not been increased, so claimants who are impacted by the cap will not benefit from the raise.

NATIONAL LIVING WAGE

- From 01 April 2024 the National Living Wage will increase by 9.8% to £11.44 per hour. The age threshold will reduce from 23 to 21
- For those aged 18 to 21 it will be £8.60 per hour. For 16 and 17 year olds and apprentices it will be £6.40 per hour

WAR PENSION RATES FROM APRIL 2024

The new weekly rates of War Pension and Allowances proposed from April are set out below. Rates have risen in line with the last September Consumer Prices Index of 6.7% and will come into effect week commencing 08 April 2024.

WAR PENSION

100%	£235.00
90%	£211.50
80%	£188.00
70%	£164.50



60%	£141.00
50%	£117.50
40%	£94.00
30%	£70.50
20%	£47.00

AGE ALLOWANCES PAYABLE FROM AGE 65

40% or 50%	£15.70
60% or 70%	£24.20
80% or 90%	£34.40
100%	£48.40

CONSTANT ATTENDANCE ALLOWANCE

Part day rate	£44.35
Basic rate	£88.70
Intermediate rate	£133.05
Exceptional rate	£177.40

INVALIDITY ALLOWANCE

Lower rate	£9.40
Middle rate	£18.80
Higher rate	£28.70

MOBILITY SUPPLEMENT

One rate	£84.55
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ALLOWANCE FOR LOWERED STANDARD OF OCCUPATION

Maximum amount	£88.60
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UNEMPLOYABILITY SUPPLEMENT

Personal Allowance	£145.20
Adult dependant	£80.70
Increase for first child	£18.80
Increase for subsequent children	£22.05

COMFORTS ALLOWANCE

Lower rate	£19.10
Higher rate	£38.20

EXCEPTIONALLY SEVERE DISABLEMENT ALLOWANCE

One rate	£88.70
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SEVERE DISABLEMENT OCCUPATIONAL ALLOWANCE

One rate	£44.35
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CLOTHING ALLOWANCE

£ per annum	£303.00
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EDUCATION ALLOWANCE

£ per annum	£120.00
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THERAPEUTIC EARNINGS LIMIT

Annual rate	£9,542.00
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CARER'S ALLOWANCE CHANGES IN SCOTLAND

A new benefit called Carer Support Payment is gradually replacing Carer's Allowance in Scotland. New applicants living in Dundee, Perth and Kinross, and the Western Isles can apply for Carer Support Payment now. The benefit will be available in more areas between this spring and autumn. If it is not available in your area then you can apply for Carer's Allowance now through the Department for Work and Pensions.

If you currently receive Carer's Allowance and live in Scotland, you do not need to apply for Carer Support Payment. Your benefit will move from the Department for Work and Pensions to Social Security Scotland, and this is planned to take place between February 2024 and Spring 2025. There will be no gap in your award and the amount you get will remain the same.

The Department for Work and Pensions will send you a letter to say when your benefit will move. Social Security Scotland

Spotlight on Benefits and Social Care

will then send you a letter to say what is happening during the move, and will also let you know when the move is complete and the Carer Support Payment has started.

UNIVERSAL CREDIT MIGRATION UPDATE

We have written before about the changing means-tested benefit system for working-age claimants. The benefits affected are known as legacy benefits and these are:

- Child Tax Credit
- Working Tax Credit
- Housing Benefit
- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance

Other benefits, such as Personal Independence Payment and contribution-based Employment and Support Allowance, will stay the same.

Claimants of one or more of the legacy benefits will have to transfer to Universal Credit at some stage over the next few years. If you have a relevant change of circumstances, such as moving to a different local authority area or changing your status from single to part of a couple (or vice versa), your legacy benefit will stop and you will have to claim Universal Credit in order to supplement your income. This is known as natural migration.

Other claimants of legacy benefits will receive a letter from the Department for Work and Pensions when it is time for their legacy benefit to come to an end. The letter is known as a migration notice and this is known as managed migration. If you claim Universal Credit under this route and would find yourself financially worse off on Universal Credit, you will receive an extra payment, known as Transitional Protection, to top up your award for a period of time.

Initially, it was just Tax Credit only claimants who were affected by managed migration. We are now aware of the plan to transfer other legacy benefits under managed migration. It is expected that



migration notices will be issued sequentially by benefit type as follows:

- April 2024 – Tax Credits with Housing Benefit
- June 2024 – Housing Benefit only
- July 2024 – Income-related Employment and Support Allowance with Child Tax Credit
- September 2024 – Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance

It is expected that by the end of the 2024/25 tax year, most of these claimants will have migrated to Universal Credit. These dates are subject to change as the Department for Work and Pensions monitors how the migration process is working and can decide to move some of these dates to a later timescale if needed.

Claimants of income-related Employment and Support Allowance only or with the addition of Housing Benefit are then expected to be included in the managed migration process from 2028.

WHEN YOU NEED TO ACT

To continue receiving financial support you must claim Universal Credit by the deadline

date given in your letter. This is three months from the date the letter was sent.

If you cannot claim Universal Credit by the deadline date, you should contact the Universal Credit Migration Notice Helpline (details on the letter) as soon as possible. You may be given more time to make a claim if you have a good reason. You must request this before the deadline date on your letter.

If you require support with the Universal Credit process, please contact your Blesma Support Officer as soon as possible after receiving the migration notice. This is to allow time to give support before your deadline date.

IMPORTANT

The Department for Work and Pensions is also developing and testing the process for a small number of claimants of any legacy benefit, and you may be sent a migration notice earlier than these timescales. It is important that you respond to the notice within the timescales given, otherwise your legacy benefit will stop even if you do not claim Universal Credit at this stage.

Merry Christmas from Cologne

I was lucky enough to be invited on the Couples Weekend to the Cologne Christmas Markets at the end of last year with my wife, Sally. It was a fantastic few days and we were left wanting nothing. Cologne is a beautiful place. Cold, as it should be in winter, and with some snow towards the end of our trip there was a real Christmas feel (assisted by a few mugs of glühwein)! There are six Christmas markets in Cologne, from the traditional to those with live contemporary music. They were busy, and although we could get around it was a bit of a challenge using a wheelchair.

On Saturday, we went as a group on a tour around Cologne. We hadn't realised it was a food tour, and there was food galore – I have never eaten so much! On Sunday, Sally and I visited the Cologne Cathedral. It is a beautiful building and well worth visiting. We had also planned to go to the Ludwig Museum but ran out of time. It holds Europe's most extensive collection of Pop Art, the third-largest Picasso collection in the world, one of the most important collections of German Expressionism, outstanding works from the Russian avant-garde, and an excellent collection on the history of photography. There are also many Andy Warhol pieces.

That evening, we went on a river cruise on the Rhine – spectacular views! It was lovely and we have thought about doing a river / canal cruise in Europe at some point. For me though, events like this are all about the people. We had a fantastic group and shared many experiences and much laughter. Going on the trip with Sally was very special, often it is only me going on events leaving Sally at home. This time she was very much included throughout. Fantastic!

It was an amazing break and I would thoroughly recommend the Christmas markets to anyone. It is all about a social gathering where people get together for laughter and banter in an amazing location. Great fun. A huge thank you to Blesma.

Spencer Bull



Those who have passed away

May they rest in peace



ADAMSKI R	Widow	19/12/23
AUGUSTUS A R	Honorary Member	18/12/23
BALLS B H	Royal Army Service Corps	25/08/23
BARRETT D W	Royal Air Force	06/07/23
BARRETT J D	Royal Army Medical Corps	26/11/23
BLANSHARD P J	Royal Navy	09/01/24
BRUNNEN P	Royal Engineers	27/01/24
BURGESS E	1st The King's Dragoon Guards	10/01/24
CARROTT B W D	Royal Military Police	02/12/23
CONSTERDINE D W	REME	21/01/24
CUMMINS D	Widow	03/01/24
DAVIES P A	Royal Welch Fusiliers	27/01/24
DAVIES E	Widow	22/01/24
FLANAGAN S	Royal Corps of Transport	19/12/23
GILBERT J M	Widow	23/12/23
GRIFFITHS J	Royal Navy	01/01/24
HACKETT M	Widow	10/09/22
HARROWER N D	Royal Army Service Corps	22/11/23
HOLLANDS W E	Royal Air Force	29/11/23
HOLLEYWELL E	Widow	01/02/24
JOHNSON	Royal Navy	13/12/23
JONES B M	Royal Engineers	15/12/23
KEATLEY P M	Royal Signals	12/12/23
LAXTON M E	Widow	12/01/24
MCGEARY G	Royal Navy	04/12/23
MURDOCH J	Queen's Own Highlanders	25/12/23
MURRAY B R	Widow	25/12/23
REAY M	REME	02/02/24
SEYMOUR K F	Royal Signals	20/10/23
SIMMONS V	Widow	14/01/24
SQUIRRELL M I	Widow	11/01/24
THOMAS J	Duke of Wellington's Regiment	13/11/23
WALTON M E	Royal Army Ordinance Corps	09/12/23
WEBB M	Royal Artillery	23/12/23
WILLIAMS A	Widow	26/01/24
YANDELL T A	Royal Corps of Transport	22/01/24
YATES N	Widow	20/12/23
YOUNG T H	Royal Artillery	21/01/24

Useful contact numbers across the Association

TITLE	NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL
BLESMA SUPPORT OFFICERS			
BSO (Prosthetics)	Brian Chenier	M 07796 715908	bsoprosthetics@blesma.org
BSO Eastern	Kevin Long	T 020 3954 3020 M 07825 536364	bsoeastern@blesma.org
BSO London & South East	Steven Burrell	T 020 7501 3030 M 07469 242277	bsolse@blesma.org
BSO Midlands	Vanessa Lucas	M 07825 536363	bsomid@blesma.org
BSO North East	Christine Landess	T 020 3954 3027 M 07917 972825	bsone@blesma.org
BSO North West	Amanda Brownlie	M 07825 536362	bsonw@blesma.org
BSO Scotland & Northern Ireland	Steve Burton	M 07766 258461	bsosniroi@blesma.org
BSO South	Pat Donnachie	T 020 3954 3026 M 07741 846106	bsosouth@blesma.org
BSO South West	Sarah Payne	M 07741 737563	bsosw@blesma.org
BSO Wales and West	Tom Hall	T 020 8548 7098 M 07780 165085	bsowest@blesma.org
Members Living Overseas	Liz Watling	T 020 8548 7080	iwabenefits@blesma.org
BLESMA OUTREACH OFFICERS			
Outreach Officer Eastern	Francesca Anastasio	M 07741 661159	outreacheastern@blesma.org
Outreach Officer London & South East	Jess Linge	M 07741 845793	outreachlse@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Midlands	Sarah Cruddle	M 07741845429	outreachmid@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Northern Ireland	Fiona Morrison	M 07741 744617	outreachni@blesma.org
Outreach Officer North East	Adele Miller	M 07741 847211	outreachne@blesma.org
Outreach Officer North West	Catherine Green	M 07741 846674	outreachnw@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Scotland	Rachel Kennedy	M 07884 695703	outreachscotland@blesma.org
Outreach Officer South	Amy Barnes	M 07435 283102	outreachofficersouth@blesma.org
Outreach Officer South West	Gordon Clark	M 07788 312747	outreachsw@blesma.org
Outreach Officer Wales and West	Jason Suller	M 07741 744141	outreachwest@blesma.org
INDEPENDENCE AND WELLBEING			
Head of Welfare Support	Colin Branch	T 020 8548 7090	hws@blesma.org
Benefits and Social Care Adviser	Liz Watling	T 020 8548 7080	iwabenefits@blesma.org
Grants and Outreach Activities Executive		T 020 8548 3516	goaexec@blesma.org
Membership, Branch and Volunteer Network Executive	Debbie Mayne	T 020 8548 7093	mbvexec@blesma.org
Welfare – Direct Line		T 020 8598 9459	
ACTIVITIES			
Head of Activities and Events	Jess March	T 020 8548 3519	activities@blesma.org
Events Coordinator	Clare Wellings	T 020 3954 3021	ae@blesma.org
Events Coordinator	Nicole Findlay	T 020 8548 7097	aelocal@blesma.org
FUNDRAISING			
Head of Fundraising	Anna Scalera	T 020 8548 3517	hf@blesma.org
Community and Events Manager	Abbie-Louise Mills	T 020 8548 7089	communityeventsofficersnr@blesma.org
Corporate & Regional Fundraising Mgr	Chris Knight	M 07774 797318	crfm@blesma.org

TITLE	NAME	TELEPHONE	EMAIL
COMMUNICATIONS			
Digital Media Manager	Nick Tuck	T 01299 896282	digitalmedia@blesma.org
Blesma Magazine			editor@blesma.org
DIRECTORS			
Chief Executive	Vivienne Buck	T 020 8548 3512	ce@blesma.org
Operations Director	Tony Bloomfield	T 020 8548 3513	od@blesma.org
Acting Director Independence and Wellbeing	Colin Branch	T 020 8548 7090	hws@blesma.org
Finance and Support Director	Boston Mwense	T 020 8548 3518	fsd@blesma.org
USEFUL CONTACTS			
Main Office		T 020 8590 1124	info@blesma.org

BLESMA BRANCH OFFICIALS			
BOURNEMOUTH BRANCH			
Chair	Peter Sherston-Baker		chair.bournemouth@blesma.org
Secretary	Mary-Jane Sweetzer		Please use Chair's email
Treasurer	Hazel Crofts		treasurer.bournemouth@blesma.org
Welfare Officer	Peter Sherston-Baker		Please use Chair's email
GREAT YARMOUTH AND LOWESTOFT BRANCH			
Chair	Bob Monkhouse		chair.yarmouth@blesma.org
Secretary	Helen Cullen		secretary.yarmouth@blesma.org
Treasurer	Simon Cavie		treasurer.yarmouth@blesma.org
NOTTINGHAM BRANCH			
Chair	Andy Fitzgerald		chair.nottingham@blesma.org
Secretary	Dave Ledger		secretary.nottingham@blesma.org
Treasurer	Keith Meakin		treasurer.nottingham@blesma.org
SUTTON, MERTON & DISTRICT BRANCH			
Chair	Annie MacMillan		chair.sutton@blesma.org
Secretary	Karen Mason		secretary.sutton@blesma.org
Treasurer	Dave Hobson		Use Chair or Secretary at present
SOUTHAMPTON BRANCH			
Chair	David Rowe		chair.southampton@blesma.org
Treasurer and Secretary	Stephen Coltman		secretary.southampton@blesma.org
Welfare Officer	Jacqueline Brodrick		welfare.southampton@blesma.org

Important information if you are emailing Blesma Branch officials

Anyone wishing to email a Branch official must use a specific Blesma email address rather than a personal account with immediate effect.

Previously, Members have been sending and receiving personal data in potentially unsecured emails, which has been placing the Association at risk of large penalties. Official Blesma Branch email addresses

have now been established (please see the table above) which ensure the Association is working within the legal framework and is compliant with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

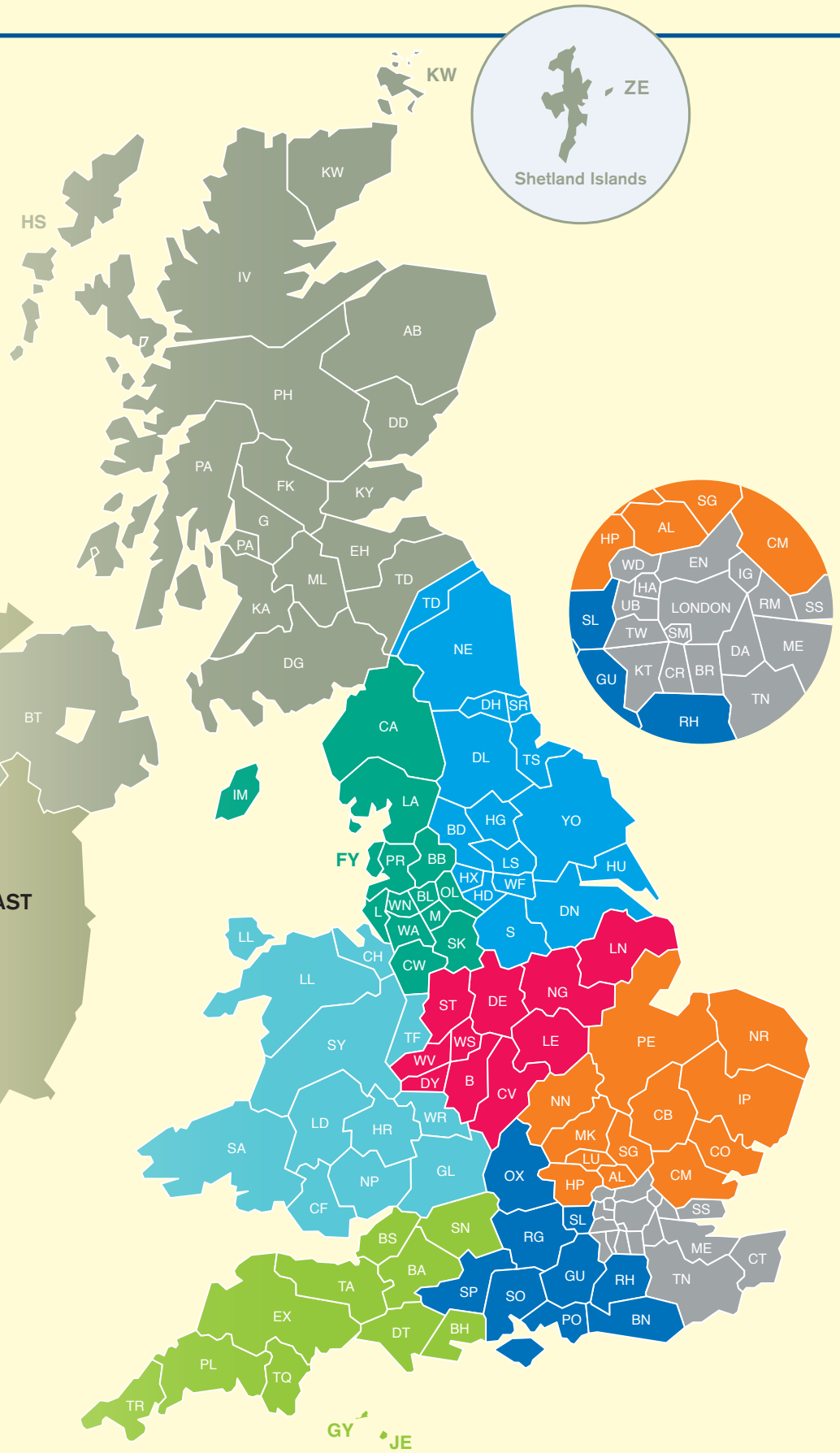
If you would like to send an email to a Branch official that is not related to Blesma activity, then personal contact information can still be used.



Blesma by area

Have you got a question or need advice? Don't hesitate to get in touch with the Blesma Support Officer in your area. The contact numbers for all BSOs, Outreach Officers and relevant members of staff can be found on p68.

- SCOTLAND & NI
- NORTH WEST
- NORTH EAST
- EASTERN
- MIDLANDS
- WALES AND WEST
- SOUTH
- SOUTH WEST
- LONDON AND SOUTH EAST



Join Scott McNeice on his journey from serious injury to snowboarding sensation in the summer issue.



Summer issue. Out 21 June



1 in 5 Blesma Members is helped through gifts in Wills

National Free Wills Network send a Will writing pack by post or email

Octopus Legacy online process takes just 30 minutes

No obligation to leave a gift

Free Will Writing Service

Blesma is partnered with two free Will writing services, for anyone wishing to leave a gift in their Will.

The National Free Wills Network will connect you to a local solicitor to guide you through the process of writing or amending your Will.

Octopus Legacy's online service is quick and easy, and every Will is checked by their team of qualified solicitors.

A gift in your Will helps us be there for limbless and injured veterans. Always.

octopuslegacy



Learn more

Contact
legacies@blesma.org
020 8548 7085

Visit
blesma.org/legacy